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MEAT

A NOVEL BY

WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

. . . *if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.* I Corinthians viii: 13

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CLOSED STACKS

MEAT by WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

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MEAT

I.

WHEN Tomlin Flagg was born he had a horn, above and a little in front of his left ear. Such a thing was not unknown in his line; it had happened at least once before. The somewhat goatish excrescence lasted little more than a week before it was absorbed into the shaping skull. Thereafter it remained simply as a hairless spot on the scalp, the size of a man's thumbnail and of much the same consistency. By and by the hair could be so brushed as to cover it.

Tomlin was never strong. He was never, in ways, altogether responsible. What is one to make of it? With the exception of Tomlin and of that one other almost legendary in-

stance of a horned Flagg, the line was a line of whole, strong, sane, comely and spirited people. Like Anne, his cousin.

Tomlin lived to be nearly thirty-one. Then he was killed by a policeman. The details were never aired. Happily the Flaggs, together with the Jeromes and the Indias, into which families they had married, had influence. It was fortunate for the policeman that they were willing to let the thing rest, for it was admitted that he had shot on impulse. Perhaps it was because they were able to guess at the nature of the impulse, and at how it could come about that he would not know in the half-darkness what it was he was shooting at.

No telegrams were sent, even to relatives. The news was conveyed by letter. ". . . Tomlin died in Buffalo on August eighteenth . . ."

But all this about Tomlin Flagg is another story, and the story is ended.

That is what Anne Flagg India thought to herself. "Ended." She dropped the crumpled note into a hole on the beach, filled the hole up

with clean sand, and smoothed it smooth. "That's ended, thank God!"

Anne India weighed more on the scale than Sam India, her husband. And yet, though he was taller than she and no skeleton, no one ever thought of her as large. She was too light on her feet, too agile in humor, too flashing. With her black hair, her dark eyes, her candid coloring, her full-shaped and shameless vitality, she was too truly beautiful. Looking at her in the open, on the beach of summer, under the blue sky in a sky-blue bathing suit, there was nowhere one could place her, somehow, short of mythology. If ever there was a mortal woman sprung from earth to dare traffic with the gods it was Anne India. And a traffic, one would say, which could never conceivably eventuate in anything less numerous than twins.

But Sam India was no immortal, and even if everybody took the children for it, Flagg and Fern were not twins.

"Twins! How adorable!" people would cry. "They *are* twins, aren't they?"

"Twins, yes." Anne could be incredibly patient. The partly wistful comedy of the wink she would give Sam never dimmed. "Synthetic twins."

It would have taken more pains than it was worth, you see, to explain that the girl-one was not born their own, as the boy-one was, but only taken in when its widowed mother, who had been Anne's bridesmaid, died in child-birth in the same week in which Anne did not die.

And anyway—"Lord knows I've done everything *but* borned her, Sam!"

Anne could be so patient, for one of her temperament. Flagg, the boy, and Fern, the girl, were two years, two months and various days old, and since it was high August and they Adam-bare to the heavens they were very brown all over. No one passing along the beach could fail to look at them, washing around in the sea-suds all by themselves, gulping, screeching, blowing bubbles, and getting spanked by combers eight inches high.

The passing females were the worst. If there

was one, there were twenty scandalized. "Those babies! Who *can* be looking *out* for them? What perfectly criminal *care*lessness! Lady—excuse me—but are those your children down there, by any chance? Well, I don't suppose it's any of my business, but if they were *mine*—"

If once, a score of times Anne explained. Very gorgeous in her crimson beach-robe and very supine on the sunny sand, she must have seemed distressingly unspiritual to the troubled ones, had it not been for the dark light of earnestness in the upturned eyes.

"But you see, I've asked the life-guard about it, and he assures me it takes quite a long while for very young children to be drowned at all permanently."

Sam was a fit mate for her. Very lean and leggy, very prone, his high brown forehead wrinkled with his pains to make things clear, he would elaborate: "And besides, something has got to be done. You see, we haven't been

able to make up our minds yet which one of the two we ought to keep."

But there were things about which Anne could not be patient at all.

One happened to-day. The proprietor of the bath-houses at the Point came two hundred yards up the beach to them. He was a young fellow and he was embarrassed. He avoided Anne's eyes and addressed his own to Sam's. He opened his mouth fruitlessly several times, growing redder and redder. Sam finally had to help him.

"What's on the mind?"

He could not look even at Sam then, but had to gaze back over a shoulder at his umbrellas and his customers.

"There's a lady—well, I mean, I've had a complaint. I wouldn't for the world, myself, you understand—but this lady—it's about your young ones—about their not wearing—not having a stitch on."

Anne sat bolt up. "Those *babes?*"

"I know, ma'am, but what can I do? This

lady, what she says is, she's got young children of her own, and she can't keep them from playing up and down the shore here, and she says she doesn't want them to be seeing—she says they're just at an impressionable age, and they're—"

"*The dirty thing!*"

Sam looked around at her and grinned.

"Bite 'em, girl!" But then his grin faded a little. "Listen here, old thing; don't let 'em get the goat, not really."

Anne turned over on her stomach. Her face averted, she made a dagger of her fingers and attacked the sand. She dug a terrier's hole deep into the dampness where the smelly things are. She had to do something blood-thirsty until she could get her proper voice back again.

Poor bathing-beach man! "I know, ma'am, but what am I to tell her?"

Anne got her voice back. "Tell her that God and I are sorry, but the world was made for *well* people to live in, first of all."

Norine, the nurse, who had come all the way

from home by the electrics, descended the grassy bank with the mail. It was a godsend.

Anne had a letter. After a minute with it she said suddenly, "Oh!"

There was something about it that made her husband turn from his affairs to blink at her. "News, Anne? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Nothing in the whole good, clean, big, bright world is wrong, not any more. Oh, Sam! Cousin Tomlin—"

But then she jumped up. Casting the robe off like a crimson cloud she ran down to the water. She leaped over the babies. She threshed out, wide-armed. She dived.

The letter lay where she had dropped it on the sand. Sam would have given his right eye to know. What about that unappetizing cousin of hers, Tomlin Flagg? What the devil! to send her off this way, transfigured and galumphing? Sam would have given *both* eyes.

All Anne wanted was that one dive, deep through the bitter cleanness of the sea. Hands

arrowed above her red bathing-cap she sailed up and out. She came back splashing the water white. She caught up a twin in either arm and held it high. Perilously balanced, clutching, laughing, shining, she bore them through the golden wind.

"Aren't they beautiful! Aren't they gorgeous, Sam! Did you read?"

"Read what? This?"

"You wouldn't. . . . But look at 'em, Sam! Look! Aren't they thrilling? Isn't the whole round earth, the sea, the sky, the wind, the sun —Oh, Sam, my dear! Wait, Norine; catch! Hang on to 'em, idiot; don't you dare let 'em get all sand again. . . . You haven't read it, Sam. I'll tell you. Tomlin Flagg is dead."

There was already the hole she had dug. Crumpling the note she dropped it in with the smelly things; then she filled it up with clean top sand and smoothed it smooth.

"That's ended. Thank God!"

Stonebridge, Connecticut, where Indias have

lived for five generations, is as truly a state of mind as Boston is said to be. But whereas Boston, in the saying, is the state of a mind that is made up, Stonebridge is the condition of one pulled four ways by four geographies. North and south the pulls are equal only because they are equally feeble; if the Berkshires are not much as mountains, the Sound is a mild sort of sea. East and west is the tug-of-war. Stonebridge is still New England, yet it is already New York. The cream in the coffee the Wall Street broker gulps down in time to catch his "eight-fifteen" is brought in through the woods by a man who plows with oxen and says "haow."

There was a time when the fit ones cleared out of this section and headed for the fatter west. At least most of them did. Sam Henry India, 2d, on the theory that the region which is emptying is the one where the elbow-room is going to be, remained. He farmed a large tract of bottomland, improved the local turnip, imported and acclimated a Rhineland grape,

built a brick house in the Georgian manner on a hillside overlooking the Danbury road, and entertained therein visiting singers, New York and Boston merchants, western politicians, at least one prince of England and one president of the United States. Before he died, at a good age, he had founded two institutions, one of them the most New England of the New England colleges, and the other the finest wine-cellar north of Philadelphia.

Come of a line which had given at least one son in each generation to the church of the great dissenters, he was endowed with a strongly dialectic mind. The trouble was that he used it. He took the dogma of his fathers and looked at it. God, they said, was omnipresent and eternal. God had been present therefore everywhere, always. Everywhere and always, Sam Henry the Second decided, there had been good minds and true spirits, "one with the Light." But no sooner was this assumption stated than it had raised the devil with the accepted codes of moral practice.

Looking back, looking abroad, he could find hardly a Connecticut sin which had not been considered a good act by some body of these good minds and true spirits. His intelligence, compounded of shrewdness and humor, refused to accept here-and-now too overwhelmingly as against then-and-there. But then morality became a matter of usage, standards of righteousness multiplied and mutually canceled one another. Anarchy remained. Sam Henry the Second arrived at the wilderness where many men have been lost.

But he was not the kind to stay lost long. He still believed in God. He got back to that. He propounded a question. "Has God given me anything at all, then, to go by?" He unearthed an answer. "God has given me an intelligence with which to decide between a given right and a given wrong, and a will with which to act upon that decision. *But*—he has given these things also to my neighbor."

He caused to be carved in the oaken beam above the fireplace facing the door in his big

front hall these words: I AM NOT MY BROTHER'S KEEPER.

New England, the western cradleplace of a rigid and hard-disciplined sect, has had perhaps more than its share of these intense individualists.

From him, through an intervening Grant India, Sam Henry 3d, who was his grandson and the husband of Anne Flagg, inherited the house above the road to Danbury, its rebellious carving, and its peerless cellar, together with a share in a New York publishing business in Union Square, and a capacity for living at once with gusto and with moderation.

The view from the upper veranda of the India house had changed in seventy years. Towns grow, even in New England; what had once been the sleepy village of Stonebridge on the Boston post road now reached an arm of mills and mill-workers' homes up the valley where Sam Henry the Second's fields had been.

It was lucky he had built his house high. Up here toward the ridge, with remnants of elm and nut woods around it, it still kept something of an illusion of room, of unhurried living and of air to breathe. And still it had its little river to look at, no matter if it was cut by chimneys standing here and there against it, lean and black.

Under the sunset this evening, deep in York State a cloud was rising, whitened now and then by summer lightning.

Lights had been on in the children's room, the south one facing the gallery. Now they went out, and there was the sound of Norine closing a door inside, with care. Almost immediately then there were rustlings, stealing feet; the dark rectangle of a window framed two whitenesses, hands and noses pressed against the screen.

"We see you," said Sam, from near the railing outside.

"Horrible, horrible children!" said Anne.

"We want to stay up," said Fern. "We would not go to sleep when Norine said."

"All right." Their father was reasonable. "But if you're going to stay up till all hours you've got to be bright awake. I'll take you both to the bathroom and give you cold showers, and then it will be all right."

This was a flat failure.

"Yes," said Flagg.

Giggles.

Fern said, "Come and do."

Anne paid no attention. She gazed at the darkening sunset, rapt, her hands clasped behind her. "One, two, three, four," she mused aloud. She counted very slowly. "—five—six—" There was in it something eerie, gloating, disconcerting, a kind of pixy cheer. "Seven—eight—nine—" But at nine there was a sound of whispery squeals and the frame of the screen was empty dark again.

Anne stood for a moment, her ears "laid back."

"Peace descends," she said.

"Isn't it wonderful, Anne, when it does?"

"And it isn't as if I didn't love 'em awake and ramping, either."

"Love 'em! It's not the word."

"No, and that's really true, it isn't. Because that's the word I've got to use for the whole world to-night. I love the whole world and everything that's in it, since that letter this afternoon. I mean—like this."

She spread her arms, her hands palms up. Lifting her face to the darkening sky she floated away toward the far end of the veranda, pirouetting on her toes. Lightly, lightly.

A flare from the distant cloud-bank came and whitened her, and Sam, watching, saw her for a wink as something strangely separate, something pure as stone, pitiless, exultant, pagan, the woman of Hellas who should have been the mother of the West and was not, because an Asiatic Mary was.

"I had no idea," he said, "you felt like this about your cousin Tomlin."

"It's going to storm, Sam. How good it feels in the air, coming."

"Because you've never said much about him."

"Dance with me."

"But hang on a second." Sam was mystified. "Why?"

"They never dared let Tomlin dance."

"I see."

"I wonder if you do." Night was coming, pressed on by the rain behind. Anne watched it. "I would forgive you for thinking it strange of me to act this way, after a death in the family. I know it wasn't Tomlin's fault that he was Tomlin. I know too that he would have been happier dead long years ago. I'm not thinking of him; I'm thinking of the things that healthy people are fond of, like loving, and playing. Like dancing. Tomlin did something to dancing that made it for me, for years—Sam, it's so hard to make it clear in words. He took something away from dancing

that ought to be given back to it. Am I silly, dear?"

Her husband was staring at her. "Lord God, but you're beautiful!"

"He took something away from all our straight desires, Sam. He never knew what it was to love anything, take pleasure in anything, savor anything. He only knew what it was to shudder and grab, grab and gulp. And that's another thing. Sam, I think I'd like a glass of wine."

"I'll go down."

"Go away down, down to the cellar. Is there anything there that's been hoarded and treasured—anything that's grown priceless—anything that there's only one of left in the world?"

"I see. He did something to wine then, too?"

"What he did to it, what it did to him, poor weird fellow, and what he did—yes, wine too wants something given back to it, Sam."

India returned presently with a bottle and thin glasses.

"I've got it, the very thing, Anne. But that squall's coming fast. Shall we duck inside?"

"No. Here."

"That thunder's going to have a crack in it all of a sudden."

"Tomlin was afraid of thunder and lightning. Stay here. What do you mean, the very thing? What have you found that's rare enough?"

Sam held up the uncorked bottle. "It's too dark to see, but it's a darned beautiful thing, the way the years have bitten it and the spiders written. I wish Grandfather India could see it himself now; it would give him more of a thrill than he ever got even from his '60' Burgundy."

"It's not the '60' then?"

"No, nor the 'China Market,' nor any of the museum pieces. It's humble. Hold the glasses. I wish you could—there, did you see it by that flash? The blood of the land.

'*Laid down in 1858*,' in the old boy's own handwriting, '*from the new vines east half Broken Hill.*' The blood of Connecticut—"

"Shed for—"

India laughed, impressed. "Funny sacrament." Before he drank he spilled a little from his glass over the railing to the distant soil.

It was a wine! Savoring it slowly, even so little, it ran into their hearts and into their veins. The summer lightning had taken shape; thunder fell down the sky behind it in zigzag crackles. Black and white, erect, apart, unwinking, the woman came and went in the man's sight.

"Anne!"

"Yes?"

"You're—I don't know what I mean."

"When I was a child, Sam, I remember there was only one thing of which my father and mother made a mystery, only one truth they evaded with an awkwardness plain enough for me to feel. The thing they would never explain to me was their reason for wanting me

to keep away from my cousin Tomlin on our visits there. Whatever that evasion did to me, I've had to fight it all my life ever since. And to-night it's finished. Tomlin's dead."

"Anne, I thought I knew you. And now I'm not altogether sure I do."

"Come and find me."

Huge raindrops, spinning on themselves, began to fall. They ran for the door, got through, and closed it. In the dark of their room they found themselves in each other's arms.

"Yes."

"I love you, Anne. But wait, wait."

"No, lover, don't wait. Nothing matters any more."

The hill up in the woods behind the house was not more than ten yards long, but to Fern and Flagg on their swooping sled it was like the bottom falling out of half Connecticut; you can't hold your breath forever.

Flagg considered himself a splendid steerer,

but sometimes he was not. Every time things went wrong and the pair vanished in the bordering snowbank, sled and all, Norine would break the path still a little wider for them, chunking patiently up and down in her elephantine arctics.

Then she would look at the sky, where in the west the early sunset of February began to yellow the cold blue, and then inquiringly up at the children's mother, seated bundled in furs on a log at the top of the slide.

"You don't think, ma'am? It grows nippy."

"Oh, give them another minute; don't be such a worrier, Norie. Look at 'em! Cold? Not they!"

"But you, ma'am. Mr. India laid it on me that I should make you—"

"But I'm *warm*, I keep telling you. And anyway, you can wash your hands of me; there he's coming now."

India, in his city clothes, a brief case fat with manuscripts under an arm, turned away from the side door below when he heard the

coasters' racket and came climbing with long steps. The first thing there was was a collision, the immovable object met by the irresistible force.

He picked them and himself up out of the drift.

"Hey! where do you think you're going? The idea, runing me down!"

"You got *into* our way, you did."

"An innocent pedestrian. Of all the outrageous!"

"You did it *purpose*, you *know* you did."

Plastered with snow and infants he came on up to judgment.

"Woman, you saw 'em. Justice is all I want."

Anne's smile, these months, was luminous and museful. She shook her head at him in mock despair. "And here you are nearly thirty-three."

He put the kids down. "Scat!"

"And you," he challenged, "what are you,

nearly? I'd say about six. Out here in the snow, and the sun gone down, and you *sitting*."

"I'm not cold, dear, not a bit. And don't scold. I've been so good all day. I've watched my steps till I look silly, not lifted things, not reached." She put out her gloved hands to him. "Sam, it's going to be a good baby."

They went down hill behind the nursery mob, much more slowly. The sky at dusk was the green of ice. In the valley strings of hard lights glittered. The pines on the hillside were turning black.

In a pocket between two of the pines Anne stopped. India looked around at her quickly, for under his hand he had felt a shiver along her arm.

"There, you *are* chilled."

She shook her head and tried to turn her eyes away, but he had seen them.

"Anne, what's happened? Something's happened to frighten you."

"No."

"Yes."

"It's these trees, I think, the black cold that comes out of them at this time of night. How can they be so—" Oh, nothing, nothing. Come along. I'm so hungry I could— I'm so ha-ha-happy—"

She was against him, her teeth chattering, her fingers winding into the stuff of his heavy coat. Sobs racked her, but there were no tears. Her face was white and twisted. "H-h-hold me, Sam! Put your arms ar-ar-around me! Tighter! Keep everything away, away, away!"

"Females are ridiculous," she told him by and by. It was when they had got down to the level, under the shadow of the house, where the yellow rays from windows fell across the snow. It was the first time in a long while he had heard her laugh aloud. "Ri-ri-ridiculous, Sam!"

In Connecticut, not even a day in June can be so rare as a morning deep in May. Nothing

about May is solid or warranted or certain-sure. There is still a gossamer grayness through the green, still a note of arrival and restlessness in the song of the bird. Sunshine is gambler's gold, not yet safely won; rain-clouds put their heads over the horizon and look around. Children cannot walk but have to run, cannot talk but must make a hullabaloo.

Norine had been told to keep the children away from the house, and she did her best. But Norine too was at the end of her strength after a night that had seemed as long as any year, and the "twins," nearly three now, sound-slept and swollen with spring, would have been a handful for Norine at the top of her best. If it wasn't Flagg chasing Fern it was Fern chasing Flagg, out of sight and out of bounds down the hill. From moment to moment their miscreant voices, shrill as pirates', descended through the hangings of the wood, entered the windows, and stabbed at the knots in India's nerves.

"Damn 'em!" He walked from end to end

of the long downstairs room, pressing the heels of his hands to his temples. "Oh, be quiet, be quiet, can't you! For God's sake, what's happened to that fool, Norine?" He hardly knew what he said. "Children, have a little pity. Go away! Be still!"

Doctor Blakeley watched him. The physician had taken off his white things and put on his black coat again. His attitude seemed to be saying: "My dear excited fellow, what a rotten time you're giving yourself, and all over nothing—perhaps." At last he protested out loud. "Why bother so much about those children, India?"

"But it was you, doctor, who said she *must* have quiet."

"I know, but I didn't mean that we should make the birds stop singing or the wind blowing or children running and laughing in the woods. Of all the sounds on earth, those won't hurt Mrs. India. Let her hear them all she can."

For at least the tenth time since Anne's baby had been born at three that morning, India

lowered his head between his shoulders, knotted his brows, and addressed himself to the physician in a tone compounded of misery, distraction, and belligerence.

"Doctor, you don't get this. You don't seem to understand."

A door opened and a nurse stood in it, white and cool.

"Doctor Blakeley."

"Yes, is there something? The mother, or the infant?"

"The infant's respiration—"

"I am coming."

"He is coming, can't you hear?" There was an unwonted sharpness in India's tone. "Directly. Please shut the door."

When the woman had obeyed, he faced the medical man, feet wide, arms folded. He was wretchedly conscious that what he must say he could not say. All his training, all his inheritance, stood up against him. Deep color flooded his face. But there was the extremity of his need.

"Blakeley, I want you to listen."

"I'm listening."

"The—that—in the other room—"

"The infant?"

"It's not going to live."

"You don't know, India. It may. I should say, if we're wise enough, *and* lucky enough, there are at least two chances in three—"

"Blakeley, there's no chance at all. Get that through your head."

"You're tired, India. Will you simply take my word for it that the things you're making such mountains of this morning are no more than—"

"Doctor Blakeley, let's stop talking at cross-purposes. You know as well as I what I mean when I say it won't—*can't*—live."

It was the doctor's turn to widen his stance a little, harden his neck-muscles, and narrow his eyes.

"I'm beginning to be afraid I do."

"A moment's negligence on your part, or the

nurse's, one humanly justifiable let-down, one humane mistake—"

"India, if you'll stop short there, perhaps I shall be able still to misinterpret the thing you're floundering around trying to say. I'll be glad."

The other shook his head fiercely, as if there were a wasp on it.

"Don't be blind."

"If physicians hadn't been 'blind' enough to keep on saying, 'It shall not die!' there would be no physicians to-day."

"Doctor, if a child were born with three legs, and you were attending—"

"Please!" Doctor Blakeley's eyes went down to the floor between them. "I've a right to say that I won't discuss it."

"The trouble is, you *will*. You don't realize what we're up against."

The doctor shook himself. Then he broke out laughing. "Quit it! Good Lord, look at us; you nearly had me going too, be darned if you didn't. As if I hadn't seen overwrought

parents times enough before. As if I hadn't seen enough hundreds of funny-looking new-born babies in the past twenty-odd years. Man, what you need is your breakfast. Brace up!"

"What I'm trying to tell you, doctor—two or three times before, in my wife's family-line, babies have come into the world with horns like the one—"

This time Blakeley had to slap his thigh.

"Oh, *that!* Now please! If it's that bit of a bulbosity over the ear that's set you seeing ghosts! My dear man, I wish you could see *some* kids. The knobs and twists, the monstrosities and discrepancies that the human infant can iron out in the first few weeks of its life, given a tenth of a chance. Oh, India! If I'd known it was *that!* I'm sorry for snorting—but you fathers!"

India gave up. Where he could have met anything else, mirth found him helpless. After the doctor had gone to follow the nurse he went and leaned against the frame of an open win-

dow and stared out. Seeing nothing that was not green, salubrious and mocking, he closed his eyes. He wished so he could fall asleep.

Voices, like slim, gay little birds of life, flickered through the new leaves up-hill.

"Fla-aaag! I found a hop-toad, a teeny-weeny baby one. Fla-aaaag!"

"Fooooling! You can't find me-eeeee; I'm up in a tree-eeee."

India groaned. "Children, don't!" He thought of the room beyond the ceiling heavy over his head, where Anne lay, her windows open on that hill.

How long he stayed there by the window he could not have said. But at some time the white-starched nurse returned. "If you would care to go up now, sir, Doctor Blakeley thinks you may."

India followed her. He walked through a room and a hall and up a flight of stairs. He had been born here, and here he had lived for thirty-three years, yet this morning it was as if we were being guided through the ways of

some other person's home. Some old contact had been snapped. It was not the case, of course, but he would have had the same feeling if someone had been through the house and turned all the pictures with their faces to the walls.

Anne lay on her back, her head in a deep hollow of the pillow.

As she closed the door the nurse said: "In a few minutes, Mrs. India, I shall be bringing the baby in."

Anne might not have heard. She might not have realized that her husband was there in a chair near the bed. Her eyes were wide open, fixed on the ceiling. Though the skin of her face was waxen, it was unlined.

India, in a confused, groping way, had tried to arm himself for them both, against anything. He had not counted on embarrassment. From moment to moment it deepened. He said to himself: "I ought to talk. I've got to break this ice, somehow. Otherwise, very soon, it will be too late."

He realized that the same thing had happened here that had happened between him and his house. Some familiar contact was broken. A picture was turned to the wall. . . . Panic began. Recollecting the doctor's strategy he wet his lips and uttered a strained chuckle.

"Anne, silly girl! Look at the pair of us. No wonder Blakeley has to laugh. Here we are, making all kinds of mountains out of a chance little molehill that anyone in his senses would know—"

His larynx quit working. Crimson overran his face.

What a thing to do! What a thing to *say!*

But the worst of it was that not even his hideous *gaucherie* had succeeded in reaching the woman there on the bed. A new mistrust began to grow. Last night, when the pains grew too bad, he had kissed her; there had been the shadow of a chance that it would be good-bye. It was a queer thought now. Was it, after all, good-bye?

"Anne!" He couldn't help it.

"Yes?" It wasn't like Anne's voice; it was like someone's else.

Joy sang in the wood on the hill:

"I'm a lion, Fern, and you're a trav'ler and you don't s'pect I'm here."

"Shhhh! Mother's trying to sleep, and we're to be quiet."

By and by there were other sounds, footfalls loudening on the stairs.

The doctor came in first. "There are always two ways of doing things," he said. "When the odds are anywhere near even I'm inclined to bet on nature. I think we'll have a try at nursing, Mrs. India."

The nurse entered and approached the bed, a flannel bundle in her arms.

"Mrs. India," the doctor repeated. "Mrs. India."

The nurse tried. "Mrs. India, it's the little one, the little boy." All the while she busied herself in pulling down the coverlet and laying back the soft swathings of her bundle. The doctor spoke dryly:

"Put him to the breast, Miss Ball."

Presently there came a sound of tiny trouble, a series of obstructed smacky noises. Blakeley nodded to the nurse. "Adenoids." Then, with a hint of haste, to India: "It's not rare. Small need to worry there."

The difficulty ceased. In its place there arose a wail, weak and gummy, mingled of choler and distress.

That reached Anne, at last. Asleep with her eyes wide open, she awoke and closed them so tightly that for an instant the lids turned blue. Reopening them she looked down across her chin into the little cave in the bedclothes. Beneath the clothes there was a convulsive movement as she took up her arm that had been lying dead and put it around the crying thing. Blood sprang to her cheeks.

"There-there! No, here, over here, little one. Try, my baby, try. Oh, try again. You can, you know. There-there-there-there."

The sounds of suckling were to be heard once more.

Anne turned her head in the depths of the pillow. Her eyes found the nurse and passed on, found the doctor and passed on, and came to her husband's. There they remained, fixed. Their light was beyond his comprehension. It seemed to say, indeed: "There's no use in your even trying to comprehend."

"What?" he asked aloud, as if she had spoken aloud.

Still it was all in her eyes, clear, ruthless, possessed, fanatical.

"Hands off of us!" they seemed to say. "Stand aside!"

It came to India that this was not Anne any longer, but a woman he had never known. It came to him: "After all, then, it *was* good-bye."

Sometimes India almost forgot that.

As for the "twins," when they were nine or ten they could not remember as far back as a time when they had had no little brother Rex. So they had no recollection of a mother any different from the mother they knew now, a

mother in some abstruse way more particularly mother to the youngest, the weakling, just as father was more particularly father to them.

A large, brooding, omnipresent, uncannily-watchful woman they knew her, her hands and face of an opalescent pallor, and her eyes as quiet as a nun's, save at those rare, never-to-be-forgotten moments when, at something gone amiss with the fortunes of her awkward one in their three-cornered play (a stumble or any small defeat, fault of his own more often than not) they kindled with a cold flame that left the two older children confused and trembling and stricken in conscience for uncomprehended sins.

But sometimes even Sam India himself was near to forgetting. Or if he remembered the Anne of those first few years, more and more as workaday time went by the memory câme back to him not as clear pictures but as a shadow of nostalgia to lie on him a little while, a mood colored less by sorrow than by the oppression from which he was never quite free,

which grew out of his inner sense of his failure toward his younger son.

He had always supposed that a father loves that which he begets as inexorably as grass grows from the seed where the sun has shone and the rain fallen. Anything other than this seemed a perversion of natural law, entailing shame. That he had to school himself in every word of tenderness, study every gesture of sympathy and protection he made toward the one who needed these things most, ate at his self-trust like a secret honeycombing worm.

There were moments when he flayed himself: "I deserve it all." Once, in his heart, he had committed a murder. Perhaps that was why he was to be forever ridden by this queasiness, this sense of guilty constraint in Rex's presence, he who hated duplicity and all masks.

If from time to time there were elements of comedy in it, it was the kind of comedy that is salt on a hidden sore. One night in the child's fourth year when the rickets had got what Dr. Blakeley called "the jump on him"

and it looked as though Rex might go under before morning for want of his very bones, India walked the floors of his house, driven by a panic as old as the race, praying prayers to anything for the safety of the least of his young. And then when he came to the long room at the rear downstairs he remembered another day there, heard an echo snickering, and realized that the joke was on him. "Doctor . . . you know as well as I what I mean . . . a moment's negligence on your part, or the nurse's. . . ." Always he had hated double-dealing, and here he found it making of his own man two men.

Physically, by the time he was six, seven, Rex was beginning to get the better of the enormous odds against him, making a good fight. Although his limbs were still thin in shank and big in joint, Anne's pitiless care of them through the years of the rickets had kept them fairly straight; already he was within an inch of his age's height; there was an increasing probability, Blakeley told them, that he would

be up with it by the time he was twenty-one. To strengthen India's faith, Blakeley pointed out how right he had been in his other prognostications; prompt removal of the adenoids had done magic for the piggy noises; the small, slightly goatish exostosis of the cranium, which had bothered the father so acutely, had been so far absorbed that it persisted now only as a corneous bald patch, almost entirely hidden by an overbrushing of the straight black hair.

Mentally and spiritually it was harder to say whether he was doing well or not. What does one mean by "well"? It is so much easier to say of a limb that it is straight or that it is not straight.

Bring it down to the very question of gusto. Was there anything in life, including life itself, for which Rex was as vibrantly eager as other children are? It would be easy to say no, and this because of the fact that the boy's face never "lighted up." Narrow across the temples and full-jowled, with close-set, lead-colored eyes, a full lower lip and an especially finely

cut nose with sensitive nostrils, under its cowl of damp black hair and flanked by its outstanding ears it gave in its bloodless repose an illusion of an indifference to childish pleasures and treasures amounting almost to an emotional hebetude.

It may have been illusion only. If his face never "lighted up," for desire and expectancy he had symptoms to show that were peculiarly his own. A swift dilation of the cloudy pupils, a distention and fluttering of the wings of the nostrils, these were two. Then there was the sudden and really pitiful aggravation of his bodily weakness and ineptitude. Immediately the feet wanted to run toward the object of desire each was an enemy to trip the other; the fingers he reached out all turned to thumbs. When as a baby he was learning tardily to creep they soon found that the immemorial trick of putting a coveted thing a little way ahead of him would not serve at all. For if they did this he was immediately stricken helpless, did nothing but pivot on his belly, and

by and by was sick on the rug. He was never known to cry either in plaint or in rage for a thing that was denied him. But the growing seriousness of the disorders that followed such denials, putting him to bed for days sometimes and throwing away the gain of months, became a problem to which there had to be found some radical solution.

Anne found it. She formulated it with the peculiar ice-bound calm of finality which was hers in everything touching Rex, and which was like a nun's inverted ecstasy. She abandoned a whole philosophy without a wince.

"If it won't hurt him, let him have it. If it will, keep it out of his way. That's simple enough, Sam."

Here was something for the grandson of Sam Henry India, 2d, to look at, privily, keeping his mouth shut and hiding as much as he could of his dismay. His own mind hopelessly divided these days, he felt the odds that would lie against it in meeting a mind as single, a goodness as self-immolating, as Anne's. More-

over, abeyant as it might rest for long periods of truce, he was still aware that the almost mystical hostility he had seen born in her eyes on Rex's birth-bed was still a condition of their lives; it was not the least part of the strain of playing the loving father with Rex that he felt the eye of Anne's distrust always seeing clearly through him, just as an uneasy intuition told him that in his kobold heart the boy knew, too. Bit by bit it had succeeded in dominating him. He dreaded the resurgence of this enmity, dreaded the moment when the white light of zealotry should be rekindled to make Anne and him armed strangers again.

Still, he was an India. And though he uttered it casually, one day after luncheon in the sun-porch he did utter it.

"I'm having Dr. Coward out one day next week, dear."

"Coward? Coward? Ought I to know him?"

"Oh, I supposed you knew of his place—his—it's like a school." He had the pamphlet,

thumbed for weeks, where he could get it out quickly. There was a cut of the building on the front. "See, it's a fine looking plant. Above the Hudson, grand air." India talked rapidly, his eyes on the picture held at arm's length. "And of course Rex would have the day-to-day care there that only specialists can give. And so I suppose, now that he's getting old enough, hate like the devil to face it as we may, it's perhaps the thing."

When he looked up, having had no answer, he was surprised to find Anne studying him with a thin and acrid smile. She shook her head slowly.

"I never realized till now that you felt that way about Rex."

"Felt what way?"

The boy was on the gravel path outside one of the glass doors. She turned and called to him. As he entered, with his set face and his characteristic shuffle of obedience, she put her hands out toward him in a queerly vivid gesture, the arms coming away at a tight angle

from the elbows. But before he had reached her his father was on his feet. He darted and caught up the lad and held him in savage chancery.

"Feel what way? *What way?* Don't you suppose somebody is just as dear to me as ever he is to you, Anne? Don't you suppose it would be as awful a wrench to me as ever to you? Don't you suppose if I were thinking of anyone's good but his own, I'd sooner die than think of it?"

For the moment India really meant the words that came from his mouth; it was authentic indignation. His hand ran fiercely over the boy's head and pressed it into the hollow of his cheek.

The corners of Anne's lips still held their ferine curve as she watched it.

"Of any but his own good, Sam? And so you would give someone the care of specialists in place of the care of love. You would give someone the weak and sick to play with in place of the strong and gay and well."

India dropped his eyes. He felt humbled and conscience-stricken.

"That's true," he said. "You see more things than I do."

It was the beginning of his defeat.

On the night of the day Wilson was nominated in Baltimore it was dead hot in Connecticut, and Fern and Flagg did a scandalous thing. At least it would have been scandalous if it had ever been discovered. But it was not, so it was not.

The escapade was like a chain of fortuitous links, lacking any one of which there would have been no escapade. The heat, to begin with. Overlong naps in the afternoon, and consequent wakefulness. The house's being painted and the painters' carelessness about where they left their ladders. And poor brother, poor little fellow, practically sick-a-bed these three days past from overdoing in the sun.

"He does have such a horrid time with things, doesn't he, Flagg?"

"And if it makes *us* fidgety, hot and sticky like this, in *here*—"

"Yes, because I think it must be even hotter there in mother's room."

"Oh, yes! . . . Fern, I wonder if maybe it isn't getting cooler outdoors."

From her bed, with her chin over the edge, and from his, with his cheeks between his hands, the children stared down at the pattern of moonlight from the window on the floor between them. In the stillness, with its brightness, it was like something trying to hypnotize them, not to sleep, but to a more incorrigible wakefulness.

"I wish it would be just a little cooler for Rexie, Flagg."

"I wonder. I wonder if it isn't getting cooler outdoors, now."

"I think—I think I'll just go and see."

"If you're going out on the porch put on your moccasins. I am."

Stealthy as red Indians, white as little ghosts. So it began.

It was extraordinary what the moon rays, sliding down through a windless air opaline with humidity, did to a world they knew so well by day. The top veranda was still substantial to their feet, but all the scene below it was spider-spun and fairy-woven, distances were magicked out of all reason, mountains stood where hills had been, and in a silver valley as big as space a city of satin reared its pinnacles beside a river of silk. Even the flower garden, close as it was beneath the southern railing, had grown fabulous, groves hung with velvet shadows from behind which hamadryads beckoned to adventure, and broad savannas where bold pigwiggens stood waist-deep in jewels, hallooing: "See what the painters left—it's all the wicked painters' fault —come play with us—come down!" And sure enough, just there (if one wanted to look) were the black sticks of a ladder thrusting above the rail.

"Ooooo, no!"

"No! No-sir-eee! Mother *would* be—"

"But, still, just to climb down, just to the bottom, and back quick. If I go first?"

"No, but I'd go first, though. You're a girl. But Fern—wait."

"I know. Poor Rex. It *is* a little weency bit cooler out here. I think if mother *realized* how much good it would do him. Still, I suppose—and I don't know exactly how we could—"

"I do."

Under the moon-silvered crown of his sandy hair, in the shadow, Flagg's eyes had turned to poet's eyes, fixed a million miles away on nothing. There was a zest of the triumphant dramatist in his whisper. "Ssshhh! Come along."

Led, followed, they stole along till they came to the open window of mother's room. Mother's breathing they could hear, slow in sleep.

"Rex!" Flagg called in. He knew he had called, because, eyeing Fern, he saw her nod

as much as to say that *she* had heard it at *any* rate. So he elaborated. "Come out in the cool, Rexie. Put on your moccasins, mind."

It was working wonderfully. No wonder he adored this sister. To the tips of her excited ears he saw that *she* heard the soft patter of slippers coming; to the bottoms of her starry eyes he saw that *she* saw when Rex was there in the tangled web of the moonlight with them, amazed.

"Fly, Fern. Take his other hand."

"You go first down the ladder, so if he should fall. I'll help above."

"Help! I like that! As if he needed help. That makes me laugh, doesn't it you, Rex? Look at you flying down the rungs, as good as a fireman. The trouble is, Fern, if you were only half as strong and quick as Rex you'd be glad. Here we are, bump, all safe on the ground."

"Ooooo!" Fern showed the whites of her eyes as she gazed back up the ladder. "And now I suppose—"

"What's that, Rex? I see. . . . Rex says, Fern, it's so *wonderfully* cool out here, if we'd only just steal over just only as far as the bird-bath—?"

The grass, at least, was cool. As for the dew, dew mixed with moonlight can be a divine and fearsome medicine. Fern and Flagg had to trade glances of wonder at the fashion in which, between very leaps, Rex's legs grew round and comely before their eyes—the same eyes growing mistier and mistier with exultation, affection, and pride. If mother would only ever understand that Rex was theirs to worry over and shield and cheer along as truly as he was hers. If only she could see, now they had stolen him away to themselves, what curative enchantments *they* knew for a little brother, enchantments that she and father and the doctor perhaps had never even guessed.

If she could have seen them in that race from the bird-bath to the Forest of Rhododendrons. She would have said, beforehand, that Flagg would be first, Fern second, and Rex only tag-

ging on. What would have been her confusion to see Rex India, then, hair flying, shoulders flung back like a soldier's, chest out, legs going like oiled pistons, eyes flashing, cheeks flushed —what would she have said to see him racing head for head with that champion, Flagg? She would have been so dumbfounded, at least, as to have forgotten completely that they were all in their pajamas and should have been in bed.

But *what* would she have said to Rex and the deer?

The deer had come into the Indias' garden in the days when Garfield was President. Its antlers were so magnificent that it had to lie down most of the time, and by daylight it rang hollow to thrown stones, and looked as though it might be iron, painted. But midsummer nights are other things.

Strength piled on Rex so fast that he beat them all to smithereens in the course to the deer. He beat them so far that he had time to laugh for joy before he threw a leg over the

couchant creature's back, sat equestrian, and put commanding heels into its flanks. What would mother have said to see that stag arise, docile and tall in the argent night, arch its neck, a little like an Arab charger, wheel soundlessly, and bearing the boy through striped light and shadow, trot away?

Through light and shadow. The light in taut ribbons, ghostly pale. The shadow rough-hewn in big blue-back polyhedrons. Olympian groves. Elysian glades.

The night was no longer hot, neither was it cool. The stag's pace was neither fast nor slow. Or was it both? Distances were nothing to that gait, sweeping, elastic, full of verve, yet stately. Mountains were but hillocks, shining rivers but longer leaps. Yet Fern and Flagg, running on either side, were never troubled to hold the pace; they might have been dawdling at a walk for all their breathing; their feet scarcely ever touched the ground.

Wizards had their minds, witches their wills; they neither marked nor cared where adventure

led. (Flagg found a burr in his pajama pants next morning that could have come from nowhere but near the spring above the vegetable garden.) Their eyes were not for their feet, but only for their brother, riding like a wild brave prince across the sky above them there.

Mother would never have believed. Father would never. They would never, themselves, if they had not seen him, Rex come swiftly into his own, Rex bending the mettlesome stag to his will with strong hands on its antlers, Rex with the wind of flight in his hair, his eyes shining, looking ahead, his face transfigured with an unguessed beauty, Rex with really imperial legs.

Proud Fern. Proud Flagg. Because it was they that had known, they that had dared and done.

"See!" they kept calling to each other, kept commanding, imploring.

"Only look at the big fellow, will you!"

"Nobody else could ride so, could they? Faster, Rex!"

It hardly seemed, when they came back to the foot of the ladder, that they could have gone in a circle. It was entirely possible that they had gone right away around the world.

"He must climb up first, Flagg."

"No, last, so he can catch us if we fall."

On the porch above they stood for a moment in leave-taking, arms over shoulders, making a tight ring-around of arms. Then the two let Rex go, calling after him that he should sleep tight. So, with a wave and a smile, the new-made fellow stole back in through the window-screen into mother's room—from which, of course, poor hot little big-kneed Rex had never *really* come out that night at *all*—never, that is, in any flesh more substantial than Flagg's fantasy, Fern's faith, and the glamour of the midsummer moon.

"You're so perfectly perfect to make-believe with," Flagg protested from his bed, when, teetering like burglars, they had got back in again.

"Mmmmmmm . . ."

"You're not asleep *already!*"

He popped out and crossed the floor where the beam from the window had been. But the beam had moved while they were out; it had climbed up to lie on Fern's pillow. She *was* asleep. Oh, what a beautiful! What a wonderful! He lay down beside her quietly, not to awaken her. He slid an arm under her neck, so that her head would be on his shoulder, and he kissed her temple again and again. What would it be without Fern!

It had really grown cooler. A little breeze moved through the room. All Flagg's fidgets were gone too, and he slept.

They slept so late that Rex, truant from mother's room in the morning, came in without awakening them. He stood for a moment beside the bed looking at them, enwrapped there in each other's arms. He stood for moments longer, his pupils widening and widening. Mother found him pawing clumsily at their shoulders.

"Can't you wake 'em, old man? What is it?" Then she spoke more quickly, with a catch in her throat. "What is it you want, Rex?"

"Want to get in there. *'Tween* them."

She grabbed him up and carried him toward the door, but had to pause.

"Rex, look at mother. What did you mean —try and tell mother—you wanted to get in between them?"

Questioning made Rex sullen, always. "I didn't know."

Turning her eyes over her shoulder Anne studied the sleeping "twins."

"Flagg!" she cried in a harsh, choky way. "Fern! Children! Get up! And how often have I told you—"

They sat up, startled, rubbing their eyes.

They remembered. The fidgets. The wicked ladder. The shameless deer. Confusion upon confusion—*mother knew!* Whatever else could have made her face as set and inclement

as that? Their cheeks flamed. Their guilt stood in their eyes.

But it was queer; mother went whiter than ever at this sight. "Why, children, what on earth makes you look at me like that? What's wrong with you two? All I was going to say was, how often have I—"

All she had been going to say was: "How often have I told you two not to get into each other's beds, especially in summer, as hot as [illegible] escapa. But suddenly now she thought better of it. Assailed by those memories of Tomlin Flagg from which she was never these years quite able to free herself, all her reckonings distorted and even innocence suspect, she could see nothing for the moment but the ear of this other Tomlin in her arms, cocked in who-could-know-what-avidity of waiting. What chain of darkling, precocious fantasies might not those innocent words set linking up in the queer, tight little black-haired head? What chain, indeed, was already linking? "Get in there between them."

It seemed impossible that this woman could ever have been brave or straight-thinking. Terrorized, there seemed nothing for her to trust but silence. Smoothing her brow and pressing her lips together she carried Rex away.

In the half-hour before breakfast Anne started to do a score of things around the house, and completed nothing but her decision. She waited till after breakfast, when she was alone with her husband, to put it into word.

"Now that the painters are here, Sam, I think they might as well do over the twins' room. Don't you?"

"What will you do with the twins?"

"Fern can tuck away in the southeast room. As for Flagg—Sam, when Flagg goes back I don't believe I'll have Fern—I believe I'm going to put Rex in there with him after this."

Sam laid down his paper to study her. He smiled, as much as to say, "Now, now, my dear!"

"Don't smile. Do you realize that Fern and Flagg are nearing *ten?*"

"Pshaw!"

"Very well. But if we're going to decide to keep Fern here with us—"

"If we're—*what?*"

But then India picked up his paper and began to read.

More days of stifling weather, and another escapade.

But no, this was not, in the sense the other had been, an escapade. The whole thing, the children supposed, was prearranged and understood. For what happened it was hard to see how they could be blamed.

"Father, mayn't we all go down to the beach this afternoon, bathing?"

"A day like this? On the sand? What do you want to give us, Fern—a whole family of sunstrokes? No, I should think the best thing for us to do is to laze up through the woods by and by, if we feel like it."

"Well, then, in that case, how about the brook up there?"

"You mean, to go in? Ummm. For the life of me, I don't see why not."

So there!

Father had said "laze." It became apparent that he and mother meant it. Snails could have given them a head-start up the ridge. Even with Rex on their hands, Fern and Flagg could never throttle down to a pace as dawdling as that. And why should they? Of course it was nice to be companionable—sort of keep in touch—by an occasional hail.

"Moth—er! Fath—er! Hoo-hooo!"

"Yes, children, coming. Don't let Rex go too fast, Fern. Mind!"

"Rex is all right. He's the best of any of us. Aren't you, Rexie?"

But meeting Flagg's eyes across the youngster's head then (they had him between them) Fern half flushed, half winced.

"He *is*, though!" Flagg protested, darkening and putting an obstinate jaw. He, too,

remembered a brave, supple fellow astride a moonlit stag. "You are, aren't you, Rexie Buster? Over this log you hop now, a mile high."

White Brook, brawling through the hollow beyond the first fold of the ridge, must have been named that because it was so dark a brown. In some of the pools where the shadow of the arching trees lay heaviest the water looked almost black, and this made it look cooler than any other water anywhere.

Nearly the best part of anything is the looking-forward. It was heavenly.

"It makes me shiv-viv-ver," Flagg played as he kicked off his clothes.

"My t-t-teeth are ch-ch-chattering," Fern gloated from the middle of the blue balloon of her smock.

Rex had to protest, poor fellow.

"Flagg, or one of you, I can't get my shoes untied. Do you hear me?"

It was Fern that heard him. "There, old fellow, there's one done; give me the other

foot now. . . . Flagg, though, d'you think Rex ought—"

"Hi-hi! I'm first in, Slow Poke! Woooo!" A flop and a spatter. Bubbles. A dim green frog-flight. A head popping out, shiny as a seal's.

Fern apostrophized it: "Flagg *India!* Won't you listen! Should Rex go in before we know whether mother—"

"Mother'll be here before he gets undressed. Pokey, you! You don't dare dive."

"I don't, don't I? Oh, I *wish* these buttons— Don't, don't I? Here goes for your toes. . . ."

Frog-flights. Bubbles. White mounds erupting seal heads. Blowings. Spray fights. Beatitude. . . .

"Look at Rex, he's all undressed."

"Rex, no! You wait for mother."

"*You* didn't. *Fern* didn't."

"No, but you see father told *us*—"

"Flagg, hush. Rexie Buster, you wait, and brother and I'll come right on out, right

away. . . . Flagg, you *must*. . . . Now, darling, see, we're none of us in, are we? Not till mother comes. . . . Moth—er? Fath—er? . . . Hear that, Rex? They'll be here any minute now."

"Well, jimminy, let's do something then. Not-it, for tag. But Rex is not-it. Well, I'll be it. Look out for me, Fern. There, *you're* it."

"All right, Rexie, I'm after you. What's the matter, Rex? Can't you run? Don't want to? All right, Flagg, I'm after you then, Flagg."

It's queer about twigs and pebbles; if you tread on them carefully with your bare feet they hurt like anything; but if you scorn them and jump on them, run like the wind on them and dodge like the rabbit, then they never hurt at all.

Among the dark rough tree-trunks, spattered with driblets of sunlight here and there white birches glimmered. It might have been a fairy tale, when the wicked enchantment is

broken, Fern was so much like a shining birch turned back into a princess, and Flagg another, a shining prince. If only there could have been a magic for Rex too (like an iron deer).

They always had Rex on their consciences. Now, with his clothes off, standing rapt, glum, and a little knock-kneed in this summer greenwood, he did look ramshackle. Even though it allowed Flagg to tag her, Fern had to falter as she raced past.

"Oh, come on, Rexie, play. Please! I'm it now. Skedaddle!" She clapped her hands and jumped up and down. "There! You did want to, didn't you? No, silly, not *after* me. Run the *other* way, I'm after *you*."

She wanted to laugh, but she knew she ought not. It was funny how, sometimes, Rex could be absolutely deaf and dumb, and blind .too, for the bigger his eyes got the less you somehow felt they saw. As he persisted in thinking himself "it," coming on for her at a pace that would not have caught a turtle, but doggedly,

stiffening his knobby knees and gnarling his clumsy fingers, she appealed to Flagg. "*You* tell him." There was a catch of the breath in it. The thing was absurd, yes, but it was eerie, too.

Flagg came back, bellowing gaily.

"No, Rex, you don't understand. You and I run; Fern chases *us*." But then he said quickly, studying his brother's look: "Oh, what's the difference, Fern? Yes, all right, Rexie, you *are* it."

"Yes, Rex, catch sister. Catch sister. No, sister can't get away; you're too fast for her. Don't stumble, though, silly. There you come!"

"Fine for you, Rex! You've almost got her. There, tag her quick."

"No, just tag me, that's all you need. Here, on my arm."

"Rex, just *touch* her. Don't *grab*."

"Please, brother, it's tag, not wrestling. You're hurting. Please, I don't understand.

What is it? Want sister to carry you, is that it?"

"Rex, quit it! Cut it out!"

"Oh, R-R-Rexie—Flagg!"

Then the things happened. One thing was hands coming down out of Heaven to snatch Rex up and away. The other thing was a voice from on high.

"*Fern!*"

They had seen their mother's face like that, but never *quite* like that before. And the worst of it was, you couldn't explain, couldn't defend yourself.

"Sam," mother said, hardly moving her mouth, "take Rex. And take his clothes that are there."

Father, who had come up behind, did as he was bidden, cheerful but mystified. "What's up, dear? Here we come, sonny; what's wrong? Ooo-oop! The old tummy again, is it?"

There was the sound in the background of

Rex being sick on last year's leaves. But mother never turned her bedevilled eyes.

"*Fern*," she said, "*put on your clothes. Immediately.*"

Father must have understood what it was that was so bewildering to the children in the way she said it, so frightened and frightening, so horrid. For he cried sharply: "*Anne!*"

"*Flagg*," she said, "*put on your clothes. Straightaway!*"

Poor children, they wanted to obey. But somehow, of a sudden, they had grown as inept as ever in his life their brother had been. Boy and girl, their glances met, fumbling, imploring. What is it, Fern? What, Flagg?

It was the first time they had ever heard their father speak in anger.

"What you're doing, Anne, is an abomination."

Abomination! Neither the boy nor the girl knew that word, but simply the sound of it did something they were never to be able to forget.

Between two winks their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked, boy and girl.

Cringing, Fern caught up her garments and ran away into the undergrowth upstream.

His eyes down, his face as red as murder, Flagg fumbled into his things.

For a full half of the way home, husband and wife said nothing. He was too angry; she was too far away. That she could be so far away, so buttoned-up and cold-blooded, only deepened his anger. It was a pity her instinct ran that way, and that he could be hoodwinked by it, and never guess what a shambles lay beyond the smooth white wall she reared.

Anne spoke first, but not to him. There was a rustle of a body moving through brush down the hill fifty yards to their right, and she lifted her voice to call: "Flagg, dear, is that you?"

"No," India told her, "it's Fern, sneaking home. Flagg's behind us as far as he can keep, like a whipped pup with its tail between its legs."

"Poor twins. I'm sorry."

"*Sorry!* . . . Rex, run on ahead. . . . Anne, if you were sorry, how could you do to your own children a thing so abominable, so devastating—"

"Did you see Rex?"

"Are you sure, whatever it was that happened, that Rex was not to blame?"

"I know, as you know, that whatever happens, Rex is not to blame."

"Who was, then? Was Flagg? Was Fern?"

"Neither. But it seems to me that we who can afford it have got to be willing to be hurt a little, hurt even a lot, now and then."

The maddening thing was that India felt that everyone would feel that he ought to subscribe, ought to bow his head, play the saved sinner to her saint. To keep from doing it he had to whip himself on.

"I know one thing. You were wrong once, and I was right. Then we could have taken

our time. Now the break has got to be violent. The business of going away has got to be—"

"Going away where? To school?"

"To school, Anne."

"Yes."

He shifted a quick glance to her, surprised, and found her looking at him, or rather on through him, as she had looked through the ceiling on the day when Rex was born.

"Yes," she repeated. "This fall."

"No, now."

"Schools aren't open in the summer. But I know of a good camp for girls of Fern's age up near Stockbridge."

"*Fern's!*"

"We'll wire to-night. I can have her ready to leave, I should think, by Saturday."

India was tired. He was so much more than tired. It was late at night. Since coming down hill that afternoon nine hours had passed. When a man has beaten his fists for nine hours against a wall that, far from crumbling, shows

not so much as a mark of his hands on its vitreous white surface, he is more than human if he doesn't want a chance to rest.

He was so worn out now that he would find that for moments past he had forgotten Anne, forgotten the argument, and even where he was. One of the ornaments of the library was a terrestrial globe. From where India stood, its shadow cast on the screen in an open window looked like a fat head with an enormous sniffing nose. A moth outside the screen was the eye in the profile; two others made the mouth. It was not only a head, but it was the head of Tubby White, the "Cicero shark"; India had hardly thought of the fellow since his prep-school days. Tubby White, heaped in his chair, smiling his gloating smile as the tidbit of a subjunctive drew nearer to his maw along the ranks of the incapable. Smiling not with his lips alone but with his very eyes (for all three moths were creeping). Till it grew a grin, a fantastic, demoniacal, Latin-lecherous leering—

India had to shake himself, had to pull himself out by the boot-straps from this pusillanimous wool-gathering, and double his fists for the wall again. There remained one blow in them. It had never occurred to him as a man of honor that he could be brought to use it against Anne.

"I wonder if you realize, Anne, how tremendously you have changed."

Anne's eyes, across the table, never offered to waver.

"Do you remember a time on a beach," he asked, "when something made you furious, and you put all you had to say about life in one furious sentence? 'Tell her that God and I are sorry, but the world was made for *well* people to live in, first of all.' Remember?"

He had known he would feel small for having shamed her. He did feel small, but it was because he saw he had not shamed her in the least. Being sensitive to shame is a luxury. It's a piece of baggage that can be done with-

out, when one has to travel a narrow road, and travel light.

She could even afford to smile. The stir at the corners of her lips seemed to say: "*You* have *not* changed. You've not been down where I have been. There's no use, after all, in your ever trying to understand."

India was done; he had to catch at something. He caught at that. What if it was true that her eye *was* clearer than his? Her mystical pitilessness—what if it was only that, having passed through a deeper valley than he, she had seen a higher mercy than such as he could know. . . . Doubts multiplied. He grabbed at them greedily. What if this that he took to be the right was only his selfishness in disguise? What if it was simply that he liked to have Fern near him better than he liked to have Rex?

Tempted too far, he took the easy way, the primrose path, of self-abasement. "Well then, all right. Perhaps it will be the best thing for

Fern, too. You're better and you're wiser than I, Anne. I guess women are."

A figure in the rug looked like a man catching a small animal by the tail. Just so, when India was a boy, Ben the gardener had caught a woodchuck. The woodchuck had doubled and bitten him. How Ben had sworn!

Fern and Flagg were tired. They were tired of asking "Why?"

They had given up. Fern, as a matter of fact, had not asked it out loud at all. For the three days since that afternoon at the brook she had been nearly wordless and had kept to herself as much as she could. Now, sitting out in the new touring-car with her new bag in her lap, ready to go to the station, she seemed to be much more interested in the shiny dials on the instrument-board before her than in the group in the arch of the boxwood gate—father, mother, Rex, and Flagg.

Neither would Flagg look at her. He would look at no one. He was taking a beating, but

they would get no whimper out of his mouth, no water out of his eyes. And one thing certain; he would not again ask "Why?"

But there was one that would. Rex, who alone had managed to get through the past three days without any trouble, appeared to realize now for the first time what was happening.

He began to tremble from head to foot.

"Father, is sister going away?"

"Yes."

"But why is sister going away?"

India reddened. He had thought that that at least was finished. He had done so much stammering, pretended not to hear so many times, drawn so many red herrings, he had made up so many half-answers these days that it seemed to him now he would rather be damned than make up another one.

He turned his eyes to Anne, an ember of old mutiny in them.

"I'm all out of evasions, dear. You tell him why."

"Evasions, Sam?"

Rex tugged at her hand. "Mother, why is my sister going away?"

"Because she's not your sister, Rex, not your really, truly sister. Fern is an—you can't understand, but I'll explain it all some day."

India wheeled and ran for the car. He racked the door open and slammed it shut, cried to Hames, the gardener, to crank the engine and set it roaring—anything for noise. But noise, he knew in the heart of his bitterness, that came too late.

The little girl beside him had on a big straw hat. All the way to the station he could see nothing of her but the top of that.

It was amazing what, almost single-handed, Anne India had done with her last-born by the time he was going-on-twelve. Of a quiet cast, more given to shadow than to shine, if he still lacked something of the grace of the ordinary child of his age, something of the mental resilience and physical dexterity, yet he was cer-

tainly no queerer to the casual glance than are many boys who are not considered queer at all; no queerer, probably, than Hamlet at his years.

Dr. Blakeley, for all his cheerful prophecies, was amazed himself, and gratified. As the angels in Heaven in the hundredth come to repentance, so the medical man was more eagerly interested in the weakling saved than in the ninety-and-nine decently found to begin with. More than once, at something the wooden fellow would do or say to show he was nobody's fool, the doctor would cry: "Between you and me, Mrs. India, by gracious, we'll make a congressman out of him before we're through."

Or as Flagg put it: "Nothing much gets by Rex, I'll tell you that."

Flagg had taken to trapping rabbits, up behind the ridge. All the boys at school were doing something; the money they earned went into the "club" that "sent to the Belgians." There was to be another year yet before his own country went into the war, but the section was strongly pro-Allies; one of the papers his

father took in was a mouthpiece of the British government, and Flora, the second-maid, a Cornish girl, had lost her lover in the fight out of Mons. The imagination of a lusty fourteen-year-old had to be in it. It was always with an air of martial adventuring that he started out of a snowy morning to make the round of his traps; his changing voice rumbled its deepest as he cried: "Come on, Rexie, let's see how many Huns we've caught to-day."

One morning Rex came upon a rabbit caught by the forepaw in one of the line of traps he was following. In place of calling his brother to deal with the creature he fell to the work himself. Flagg found him making what at first he took to be a fumbling botch of the business, his pocket-knife gory, the skin ruined, the rabbit screaming.

"Get its heart out!" was all Rex would say when Flagg had pulled him off. "It's a Boche! Get its live heart!"

"Wh-where'd you—who t-t-told you anything l-l-l-like—"

The look of Rex, his mouth blue, his pupils swollen, and the rest of his face as quiet as something frozen, was enough to make anyone stammer.

The youngster writhed to get back. "Germans are bloody. They murder people. They murdered the Belgians; they murdered Flora's Frank; she'd like to eat their hearts raw; she told me so. Let me go, let me go."

It was a lot of war in one dose for Flagg. His stomach did funny things. So did his fingers. One of the first of the laws of life was that no hand should ever be lifted against Rex. He was appalled when he heard Rex whimper.

It had to come out when they got back home, for the marks were on them. Father looked a little green, as if his stomach, too, were doing funny things. But mother only put her arm around the shaken cadet's shoulders, and with the eyes burning black in the large white oval of her face, half witch's, half nun's, she said:

"The people who feel things first are the ones who suffer. We'll all be feeling what this one feels, a year from now."

This took Flagg down a peg. It impressed him. He began to wonder if his young brother hadn't some qualities and powers, not only that he himself hadn't, but of a kind so rare and subtle as to be beyond the ordinary lubber's imagining.

If it had been he, for instance, who had come out morally on top in this set-to, he was sure he would have swelled a little; there would have been at least one gleam in his eyes. Not so with Rex. When his gaze passed over the big brother who had mistreated him it was already opaque again with its habitual abstraction.

Flagg was so uncomfortably impressed that he failed to recognize as consequences two things that presently came to pass. One was the dismissal of Flora, the second-maid. The other was the disappearance of father's newspapers from the library table. He had never

heard his mother's dictum: "If it will hurt him, keep it out of his way."

Neither had Dr. Blakeley. "You've been marvelous with Rex, Mrs. India," he said many times. "I don't see how you've done it." This was because he lacked the one thing that makes a doctor a great doctor, an imagination. He had no extra eye. He did not know an act of transsubstantiation when he saw it under his nose.

He marvelled at the way the muscles filled out in the poor lad's neck; he would never have guessed in a thousand years what that flesh was made of. Pieces of the mother, cut away from herself deliberately, Shylock-wise, to engraft there. Here a shred of her old sensuous joy of living. Here another shred, here another, till she had none left of that. Here the tissues of her sense of humor, till that was gone. Here her exuberance, her grace of intellectual charity, her hatred of anything less than the fairest of fair play.

If you had told Dr. Blakeley that she had

lost substance he would have doubted your sanity. "Sacrifice doesn't work that way, my friend. Gained, rather. All you have to do is look at her. She has found something most of us will never find this side of Heaven. Look at that brow."

Blakeley had been amazed by the increasing soundness of Rex's bone-work. He would have been infinitely more amazed had you tried to tell him that by the time the boy had established the straightness of his legs, Anne India had lost the straightness of her thinking.

Her husband was with her more than the doctor. Sometimes, after long intervals when it mattered little and was almost forgotten, coming out at him suddenly it "knocked him cold."

One night they were sitting in the library, Anne reading, he neglecting to. As he dreamed, there was a light on his face.

He had just returned from a three-day trip to Montreal, bringing with him a sheaf of letters written by a Canadian infantryman (now

dead) to his son. India's firm had had a tip that the letters would make a book; having read them now India needed no tip; he knew. Nothing that he had seen in words, for simplicity, clarity, bravery of vision in a time of darkness, had so much as touched what these letters resolutely grasped. To Sam India, as a layman, they had come like a cup of cool water in the sweaty scuffle of these days. Simply as a layman. As a publisher, then—no wonder, as he sat there thinking, there was a light on his face of excitement and content.

Anne said abruptly: "A penny for them, Sam."

Startled, as a man will be, he flushed and began to stammer.

"What is it, Sam, makes you look so—so secretly pleased with yourself?"

Even less than her tone, it was the quality of her scrutiny, narrow-eyed and coldly penetrating, that changed his confusion to dismay. She persisted.

"What made you tell me all this fairy-tale about going to Montreal?"

"Mon-Montreal? Why, Anne dear, why shouldn't—what are you trying—"

"Only this. Another time, when you feel you have to run up to the school at Walcott to see Fern for a day or so, don't make the mistake of imagining that I mind. Why should I? What I mind is—what I mind, Sam, is this cat-that-has-eaten-the-canary thing."

If he could but have burst out laughing. But he couldn't; he was more sharply frightened than he had ever been in his life. This turning wrong-side-out of a mind he had once supposed he knew, was too sudden and too complete. In face of it no word he could have uttered would have seemed to have any meaning.

He got his evening paper up in front of his eyes.

India did go up from time to time to the village in the Berkshires where Fern was in school (though it had never struck him as the sort of

thing he would need to hide from Anne or from anyone else). Each time he went, it was with a fool's eagerness. Much as he loved Flagg (and much as he loved Rex, of course) from her babyhood this girl with the dark-red hair and the sea-gray eyes who was no flesh of his had had a place in his heart that could never quite belong to any other person. It was going to be an adventure of a kind that hadn't its exact like anywhere else, to see her for a day or so, even an hour or so, again. Each time.

And each time, walking down the long drive to the gate after taking leave of her, he was to have a taste of ashes in his mouth.

He had looked forward to long walks, and they had long walks, over crackling country roads if it was winter, under green-misted boughs across the hills if it was spring. Long talks, and they had long talks. But curiously, dismally, and not because the head beside his shoulder was always higher than it had been last time, she was not the Fern he had known, the "twin." Always he had the feeling that she

was walking *with* him, talking *to* him, never that they were walking and talking together.

Her surface sweetness, with a glitter on it, was what hurt him. Had she been moody, had she been willing to show him by a hint that she wondered to find herself still here in an exile unexplained, he could have borne it better. Dumbness, morosity, restraint of any kind, he could have dealt with. But almost from the first she had discovered the gift of the worldly-wise woman with an awkward guest, never at a loss for small-talk to fill a gap, taking the burden, running on lightly about her life, the teachers, the girls, their parties, their packages, their escapades, until India, growing hollower and hollower, would have liked to cry: "What are they to you? Why don't you wonder about Flagg? About the garden, the house, and your mother, and about when you're going to be sent for to come home?"

It was extraordinary how obtuse the man could be. If he could have seen her after he had left her and she had returned his last hand-

wave with an easy, far-off, painted grace—seen her then hidden down behind the white pillars of Home Hall, not crying, but swallowing, her lips blue and her eyes dry—it would have grieved him perhaps, but with a grief at the other pole from this sense of disjunction and loss that he carried through the gates, ashes in his mouth and lead in his shoes.

It is curious how quickly even wretchedness forms habits. Each time, waiting for the train, he said to himself: "It will all iron out; it will all be different when we have her at home again for keeps."

They had tried having her at home, not for keeps, but over occasional holidays, but it had never worked. If it was her gracious equanimity that unsettled her father in his visits to the school, there was nothing of the sort to bother him here. Rather the reverse. She seldom spoke unless spoken to, seemed constrained, as with strangers, and showed no eagerness to play.

It fell hardest on Flagg. Flagg, whose mem-

ory was not so deeply rooted in instinct as the girl's, had looked forward to those reunions with excitement, anticipating the hours he and his "twin" were to have, once more inseparable. It upset him then to find her edgy and ill-at-ease with him, and plainly more at home with Rex. As a matter of fact, looking out for Rex was about the only thing she did with any relish, and if it was a dogged relish, mixed in equal parts of perversity, shyness, and self-preservation, Flagg could not be expected to see through that.

If this phenomenon disturbed Flagg, it disturbed his mother no less. Nothing could have been farther from her desires than to have Rex forever in the shadow of Fern. A dozen times a day she would put in between them.

"Rex is tired, Fern; you run on out. No, Rex, I mean it. Yes, Fern, I mean it. Rûn along and play with Flagg. There he is now."

And when not more than an hour later Anne had to do the same thing all over again, it was inevitable that her voice should be sharper.

It was bound to produce a friction, and the friction heat. That it never came to open flame was due to the fact that it was decided in time (tacitly, of course, all around) that the holiday home-comings would not do.

"You can go to see her quite often, Sam. And so can I."

"How about Flagg?"

"Flagg! Heavens! don't worry about Flagg. He has too many new things cavorting through his life all the time; nothing's fatal at that age."

So it was Fern's own fault, for acting in the queer way she did with Flagg and with Rex, that she ceased coming back to them for the holidays. They all saw that. That they failed to see her deeper fault, and the real reason that moved them, was perhaps because they did not dare.

The worst thing the home-comer could have done, and the one she would do inevitably, was to miss things. Being in a wordless mood she rarely inquired about them aloud; perhaps it

was because it was done in almost unconscious pantomime that it was the more painfully revealing. Half her time she seemed to be looking for remembered objects that were no longer there, the other half waiting for things to be done that were no longer done.

To those who had remained in the house through the months she had been away the process of elimination had been sufficiently gradual as to pass almost unnoticed, one week a medical treatise with plates gone from the library shelves, another a pattern magazine discontinued, another a greener patch on the dining-room paper showing where the steel engraving of nymphs and satyrs had hung. It wanted an eye like Fern's to get, all in a lump, how gutted the house of her childhood began to look.

When old Sam Henry, the Second, brought back with him from Paris a marble copy of the Medici Venus and set it on a corner table in his hall (not far from the fireplace with its impious legend) it had raised a mild rumpus

among the gossips of the neighborhood. There had been some ladies who for weeks had not been able to pass from the front door to the drawing-room without a fearful feeling that if they did not hurry they would simply have to look.

It is melancholy, though, how swiftly time kills thrills. In all probability not half a year had passed before the last lady, eyeing aslant that pure white startled gesture of human beauty covering its nakedness, branded it with a last, "I should think you *would* be ashamed, you hussy." After that, for upwards of sixty unglorious years, the figure had nothing more important to do than to invest that corner of the hall with a character, or more nearly a kind of habit, of classical symmetry, so that the eye, passing over it, no matter how inattentively, was conscious that there was something that was right. . . . Until the day when Anne India's younger son left his cap on that corner table, quite by chance, and came back to look for it.

Anne was passing through the hall at that moment.

"There it is, darling," she pointed it out to him, and would have thought no more of it. But when she returned from the library presently and found the odd child, his cap retrieved, still loitering there bemused in contemplation of the goddess, she came to a stand.

"Rex!"

He had a way of not hearing, and when he was like that there was always trouble ahead. Moved by some impulse enigmatical in him (in Flagg or another it would have been nothing more than a prank, but Rex was not given to pranking) he climbed on a chair of a sudden, put the cap on the statue's head, climbed down, and stood away again.

The cap, of course, was miles too large; it nearly eclipsed the goddess' face and hung to the left shoulder at an angle at once slatternly and incalculably rakish. Anne had to catch her breath. By a magic as swift and slight as that, out of a fragment of the integral

beauty of old Sam Henry's hall a naked bawd was conjured, an amorous flesh, a practiced coquetry of cringing. If you don't believe it, try the same trick sometime on that masterpiece of the lost sculptor of Hellas.

As always, at need, Anne moved quickly. She got Rex's cap on the right head, and the boy himself out-of-doors. Then she rang for the maid, and had the maid call in Hames, the chauffeur-gardener.

Her husband and her elder son had been for a tramp; it was Sunday morning. When they returned to find the hall furniture rearranged they took it in different ways. They had both been born in this house, but India had been born longer ago than Flagg, so his fetch-up was the sharper.

He said nothing, though. He stood blinking for as much as a minute, plainly turning the business over and over in his mind for the answer he knew must be hidden somewhere there. Presently his eyes came back from a corner. Darkness crossed his cheeks. Turning, still

without a word, he passed into the library, sat down in a chair, and stared at the rug.

Flagg's reaction was another matter. He was, of course, delighted. Change is adventure. He went cruising around like a giddy Columbus, trying an old chair new in a new place, bombarding his mother with "Whys."

"Why's this table here, mother? Wasn't it —wasn't it in some corner—that corner there? Oh, and didn't it have something on it?"

"We've shifted everything around, Flagg dear. Rex, run and tell your father dinner's on."

"But what *was* it? I know, just as well as anything, only I can't—"

Rex had not gone. "There was that statue," he said.

"*I* remember. That white one. Where's it now? I don't see."

"There didn't seem to be any place for it, this way."

"Oh, please, then, may I have it in my room?"

"It's gone. Run scrub yourself for dinner, son."

"Gone where?"

"I gave it away. . . . Sam, dinner's on; won't you come now?"

After Sunday dinner Flagg was generally so full of food that he was quite willing to "lie down a while." This meant that for an hour cannons could not have awakened him. . . . To-day he lay down, but at just about the instant his head was starting to swim away, for no reason at all he opened his eyes again wide and started thinking.

She gave it away? To whom? And on Sunday morning, between eleven and one. Funny. . . . His thought was not so much like one thing as like a flock of things, like a flock of birds gathering to winter crumbs, another and another dropping out of nowhere, flashes of recollected discrepancies so slight, taken singly, as to have been almost forgotten. . . . The picture of the woods-ladies and goat-men from the dining-room, she had not given that away,

for Flagg knew, quite by chance, where it was this minute. And he knew where the vanished Illustrated Bible and the "History of the Rod" were, too. . . . Mother had said, though, distinctly, that she had given this statue away. So. . . . Flagg shut his eyes. Now he would go to sleep.

But very presently he was up, stealing through the top hall. Everyone was resting, so he made no noise. He was especially careful to keep the stairs from creaking as he mounted attic-ward.

And sure enough, back in the cavern of a gable-end, swathed in an old bed-comfort, there the missing statue was. Flagg sat down on the case that held the banished books and pictures and studied.

Mother had told a story. Might as well say it: mother had told a lie. Why? He would have been more deeply hurt had he not been so profoundly puzzled.

To begin at the beginning, mother would rather have her tongue cut out than tell a lie.

There lay the kernel of the enigma. The importance to her of removing and sequestering this piece of marble must be greater, then, than the importance of not having her tongue cut out. Why? Why?

Was it anything about the statue itself? Squeezing his brain, staring hard at the swathing quilt with the marble head stuck out of it, he tried to re-envisage the rest of that familiar ornament. But the trouble was that it was too familiar. Having been brought up with it since babyhood he had never thought to look at it twice. Intrigued, excited as any explorer, and yet with a tiny sense of guilt (since mother must obviously have her reasons) he reached and pulled away the covering.

He sat for a moment simply puckering his brows. He remembered the thing now, with its white arms bent in that singular fashion, awkward and graceful at once. Now that he looked at it intently it made him think of something, but what the something was he could not for the life of him think.

Had it something to do with the matters the kids talked about? Flagg went to public school. Father had told him a few things, a few A-B-C's, but of course they were as nothing to what the kids had told him. Boys have to go through that particular "course of sprouts"; it is almost the first of life's weedings-out. Ordinarily healthy boys generally come through it, if with a few scars perhaps, not too much worse for the wear.

No, Flagg decided, it wasn't anything the kids had told him.

Then what? The set of those smooth stone shoulders, the way of those arms, suddenly magnifying nakedness.

The pucker on his forehead sprouted two long creases, rays of fright. Heat struck his face. He had caught in a flash what it was he was trying to be reminded of. Till the day he died he should remember this dim, peaked recess beneath a gable-end as the way Hell must be built.

He ran out into the main of the attic. Run-

ning did no good. He sneaked downstairs, but it followed him.

His mother looked at him. "For Heaven's sake, Flagg, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." He flushed and scowled.

When his father tried to quiz him he grew sullen and averted his eyes.

He went out by himself and walked furiously through the woods. But the Devil put White Brook there in his way, and when he saw the swimming-hole he turned and ran for home again.

He was fourteen. And he was a Beast, Beast, Beast!

He did get to sleep that night, finally. But then he woke up again, somewhere in the pit of night, and began to sweat. In his dreams he had heard a voice as big as God's and as fearful as mother's: "*Fern, put on your clothes!*"

But, no! Who was the boss of his mind, anyway? He set himself a desperate stint. In his imagination he would look straight at

that statue in the attic, and he would see it as that statue, and nothing but.

It did no good. All he could see was Fern, that day on the bank of White Brook, standing, trying to pick up her clothes, covering herself with her arms, a girl, frozen, just so. Fern India! *Fern!*

How was he ever to face Fern India?

Oh, he hoped that Fern never would come home again.

II.

SAM INDIA had been drunk twice in his life. Both times were in his college days, and both were connected with athletic events. Both were in Boston. There the likeness ended. One commemorated a victory and the other a defeat.

When his college track-team (of which he was not a member) won the New England championship at Cambridge for the first time in history, there seemed nothing for Sam and his fellows to do but to go back across the river and paint the Hub of the Universe red. The Hub could stand it. There was very little material damage done, and if a few policemen had their hands full in the small hours, that is what policemen's hands are for.

Grant India, Sam's father, come up to the meet in the double capacity of alumnus and son of the Founder, retrieved his offspring from the

top of an elm on the Common, where he and three other squirrels were hiding nuts away against the winter, and piloted him back to the Adams House in the Sabbath dawn. Upon the lad's awakening, that afternoon, he gave him first a finger of brandy, then coffee, black, and lots of food. They talked about the victory of the preceding day, re-running the quarter, re-putting the shot that had told the tale. Concerning the celebration not much was said. It is true that, eyeing the battered celebrator from time to time, the elder man did purple a little and murmur something about "squirrels" in the depths of his chest. But his single overt comment was: "Christmas comes but once a year." And at parting: "Now, son, you get on back to work."

That was in Sam's junior year. In his last year, playing safety-back on his college eleven, standing under his goal-posts in that same Cambridge, he let a Harvard punt bounce out of his arms, saw a Harvard end fall on the ball be-

hind the line, and knew he had lost single-handed a game his ten mates had all but won.

In the dressing-room they clapped his shoulders; you would have thought he had been the hero of the day. But what was the use? He escaped and got away across the Charles alone. He began in a saloon on Massachusetts Avenue, away at the dark end of the bar, his head between his hands, his elbows heavy on the wood.

When he awoke in a hotel room two days later, his father was with him again. But it was not the same father. In the elder's eye there was a Jehovien anger, on his face disgust. "Get up and get dressed and get out of here," he commanded, when the boy had groaned and been ill. "You swine! You bleary coward! You damned fool!"

The father had softened a little by the time they were about to part in the South Station. Sam, his head still wuzzy, was nearly in tears.

"I'm through, father. I'll never touch *that* stuff again."

"All right. That's for you to say."

"Ugh-ugh, none in mine. I'm afraid of it."

At that the elder's jaw went hard again. "Afraid!"

"But then, what's a fellow to do?"

"Certainly a fellow's not to be *afraid*. Not a son of mine."

"But then—"

Grant India passed a hand over his eye with a sudden gesture of contrition. "*Mea culpa*," he muttered. Then to his son: "Your grandfather was a better man than your father, Sam. When I was six he gave me a pony. The second time I rode the beast it shied and threw me off. It hurt me a little, but it scared me worse. Your grandmother would have put me to bed. Your grandfather took me, screaming bloody-murder as I was, put me back on that pony and made me ride it the rest of the afternoon. That much for horses.

"And then about drinking. There was a lady in the neighborhood who took the old gentleman to task for having wine on his table.

She'd never have it in the house, she said, except for medicinal purposes. It was one of the few times I ever saw my father lose his temper.

" 'Medicine! Poison, you mean!'

"The lady was bewildered. Father proceeded to give her thunder.

" 'The one thing about drinking that is of importance, is that it should be of *no* importance. Mark that, Mrs. Applewaite!'

"He went deeper into it with me. The one formal rule of life he ever set down for me was a couplet he penciled on the fly-leaf of the diary he gave me when I went off to college:

> Drink high, fear not:
> Drink low, die sot . . ."

For at least three generations the habit in the India house had been to serve a single wine with dinner and a thimbleful of cordial with the coffee afterwards. The decay of this habit, like the progressive looting of the house's gracious old interior, was a process so gradual as

to pass, with a man of Sam India's unguarded nature, almost unremarked.

It was with the lighter table-wine rather than with the heavier liqueurs, oddly enough, that the first step had to do. And it was India himself who took the step (he supposed); a point to be remembered afterwards.

Rex was nearing nine when his father said to his mother one evening: "What's the matter with the muscatel, dear?"

"Matter? I didn't know anything was. Why?"

"You haven't touched it. As a matter of fact, lately— Do you know, Anne, for a good week now you've scarcely touched your wine?"

Mother made a little face at her glass.

So father said: "I'm going to get up some of the Burgundy for a change. Why didn't you tell me you'd gone off the muscatel?"

But then, after three dinners at which mother failed even to sip at the *red* wine, father put his glass away with a gesture of impatience.

"For Heaven's sake, Anne, why, if you've lost your liking—"

"I do seem to have, Sam." Mother made the same little face at her untouched glass. Having assured herself, obliquely, that Rex's eyes were upon her, she went on to amaze her husband. "The truth is, Sam, I don't believe I ever did have much of a taste for the vinegary stuff. Do you know, I'd *much* rather have ginger-ale."

Father studied her for a moment, looking foolish.

"What I was going to say was, why, if you've lost your liking for it, do we try to have it on the table at all? Of all the dismal acts I know of, this sitting here alone—"

Mother looked straight at him, her lips thin. "Why do we, then?"

That wasn't altogether the end of it; it wants a little while to take one's own bluff seriously. But after another week or so of self-consciousness, of labored whimsicality that met none in return, and of ever-sharpening argumentation

in the privacy of India's own mind, it came to him of a sudden one evening: "Good Lord! I'll be making this thing important before long, if I don't look out. And it's not worth it, not to me." So that night no wine was poured. The decanters, red and white, were left on the sideboard, where they could be "got at if wanted." If Anne had lost her taste for wine at dinner, certainly with all this India had lost his.

From then on the business of elimination proceeded without India's help, and almost without his knowing it. He could not have said definitely, for instance, what day or week it was when the decanters retreated from the sideboard and turned up in the open corner-cupboard. And since he was no longer interested in their whereabouts he might never have been aware of their removal from that one to the closed one in the other corner had it not been for the fact that, entering the dining-room one afternoon, he found his younger son on a chair before it, peering in with an air of sombre

curiosity at the forms arrayed in the shadows of the upper shelf.

He even had to ask: "What have you got in there, sonny? Goblins?"

"You don't like it either, do you, father?"

"What? A goblin?" India shaded his eyes to see in through the panes. "Oh," he laughed, "those!"

"It *is* sour, isn't it, father?"

"I'll bet it is. My hat! if they've gone and left the wine in those decanters all this while—"

"It *is* bitter, father?"

"It'll be worse than bitter—"

"Worse than poison, won't it be?"

"Poison?"

"That's what mother says."

"Well, it seems to me, then, she might have —mmmmm—nothing. We'll perform the mourning rite ourselves, Rex, my son. What's the matter with this cupboard door? It sticks."

"It's locked. It's always locked. Mother keeps it."

"Where's the key?"

"I—I—I'll show you. It's in the s-s-side-board drawer."

"Pick up your feet, old man. What do you think you're doing, herding elephants?"

"It's hidden under th-those napkins—th-th-th-there."

Carrying the decanters into the pantry father emptied their acid contents down the drain. He wrinkled his nose.

"There's the best place for *that*, Rex, my friend."

"That's what mother told Flagg and me."

When the boy had departed, the man stood bemused.

"I wonder what it's all about—this stuff Anne seems to be filling the kids up with?"

Their coffee they had as a rule in the library, the two grown-ups, after the children had gone upstairs to their studies or their beds. For a while the ceremonial of Chartreuse or Bene-

dictine continued to carry on. But only lamely. Only intermittently, by and by, since Anne had taken to leaving hers untasted, and India could never see the point in drinking a thing called a "cordial" all alone. In the end it was only when there was company for dinner that the little glasses came into the library with the coffee cups, an event of greater and greater importance as the months went by, and especially so after the war-time prohibition measures had gone into effect, and a man with "that kind of stuff tucked away in his cellar" had become an object of grinning envy and backslapping admiration.

On one such occasion something happened that was new in Sam India's experience. His guests were two friends of years, one a partner and the other a subordinate in India's firm. When Anne, feeling a little tired, had excused herself, the three men sat on over their coffee cups. The maid coming at a time that should have been right to remove the tray, India made, of course, the traditional gesture, so little at-

tentive to what he did that it seemed scarcely an interruption in the three-cornered talk about the magazine they planned to launch "when the war was over."

Denying the maid the tray for one moment with the hand of habit on it, he pronounced the formula: "A little coffee, Joe? . . . Coffee, Maynard?"

"No, thanks, Sam, no more coffee."

"Benedictine?" Already he had removed the staying hand.

"Well—Benedictine—"

"Well, when you say Benedictine, Sam, that's another matter. Eh, Joe?"

"Could do another wee drop of the tipple, Sam, yes-yes."

India filled their glasses. Then, in the nature of things, his own. He felt like winking. It was the first time in his life he had ever put down a cordial to a "Here's how!"

There came a moment in the evening when, the bottle of syrupy fire half empty, he medi-

tated: "Here's an inexplicable thing. Why shouldn't I have saved them in my own estimation long ago by having Scotch and soda brought up? Now I'll be damned if I will, the swine! *Benedictine!* My father must be turning over and over in his grave."

India stood in the doorway when, a little hilarious, the two had left. Until to-night, for many years, he had gone along comfortably in the idea that he knew them well; hard-working, likeable, companionable fellows, both.

"*Benedictine!* What incredible swine!"

A bubble of sugary, sick-sticky gas came up his gullet. He felt polluted. He smacked his mouth and said, "Blaah!"

He gloomed out into the night. Of a sudden he began to wonder about other men who were his friends. The very fact that he was wondering dismayed him.

"What's happening to everybody? What's it all coming to?"

. . . . . .

The darkest hour had passed. The Germans' last and greatest drive on the Western Front had failed, falling short of Soissons. U-boats or no U-boats, the American divisions were on the seas. And if there was corn-meal in the cakes at the Berks School commencement hop, the lights and the hearts were bright. All the hearts but three.

Sam India's heart ought to have been bright. It's not often that a father (even a foster-father) has a daughter (even a foster-daughter) who at going-on-sixteen prefers his middle-aged society at a party to that of the prep-school brothers of the other girls.

Flagg India's heart ought to have been bright. Was it not the first school dance that had ever taken him away from home for overnight, with his first dinner-clothes packed in his first full-sized bag? Could any young man have asked to be handsomer, busier, or more variously adored? No, no.

But, "Tell Fern," he muttered in the ear of his father's that was away from the girl, "tell

her," he doubled for emphasis, his hurt eyes burning pale in the dark red scowl of his dudgeon, "if she doesn't want to dance with me she doesn't *have* to."

There it was, out. And what could India do?

The least he could have done, for Flagg at any rate, was to have headed off Miss Brainard, the school matron. He should have seen by the understanding and deprecatory light on her face as she came brushing through the fronds of a paper palm behind them that she had heard the boy's outburst, and he should have clapped a hand over her mouth, for all the scandal, rather than let her let the already-crimson fellow know she had. But he was too upset himself and too slow, and Miss Brainard was sage and comforting.

"Fern's not much at dancing with anyone, Master India—not with any of the boys, that is . . . Are you, Fern? And it's so hard to understand, Fern, for you do so splendidly in dancing-class; you do dance so prettily with

Clysta Spencer . . . I think all she needs, Mr. India, is just a little more self-confidence about—"

Fern interrupted, her face expressionless, her eyes straight ahead: "I will dance with Flagg, father, if he wants me to."

But Flagg, head in air, was striding off for other girls. And there was India left, biting his lip to keep from crying, "Oh, twins!"

It was awful. It's foolish to say that what is done can't be undone. Facts can grow as thin as bubbles. Suddenly India knew that this Fern and this Flagg had never been twins, never playmates, never even acquaintances.

Later, out on the lawn, under the trees hung with Japanese lanterns, he saw Fern and her room-mate, Clysta Spencer, arm-in-arm at a little distance from him. The way they were watching the tall bright windows of the building, crossed by the shadows of boys and girls merrymaking, disturbed him more profoundly than he could have explained. He got a sense of something distorted, a kind of "united we

stand," that somehow there ought not to have been. A completeness of concord. In their quietude, their identical pallor, their mutual defense, defiance, and disdain. It made him want to bellow: "Go straight on in there, you fools, and get yourselves beaus!"

He called Fern's name. As he walked forward, Clysta left her alone to await him and vanished eerily in the criss-cross light.

"What is it, father?"

"Ah, Fern, old thing!"

He made to fling an arm around her shoulders. Whether or not it was something she did with her neck he could never say; all he knew was that when his arm touched her it failed to "stick," slid off of its own weight, and hung down again by his side.

It confused and embarrassed him and made him stand away as sharply as a how-dare-you-sir might have done. It made him open his eyes. He looked at Fern as a person-of-her-own for the first time ever.

She might have been a slender eighteen, for

she was tall for her age. India had remembered her all these absent seasons as a thing of beauty, and now he saw her a thing of beauty, but not of the kind of beauty with which his fond and purblind inner eye had continued to invest her as she grew up in absence. Where he had taken for granted health, there was no health. Chalky white, dark-slashed of lips and eyes, the red of her hair as deep as the lees of black wine, it was in no grace of harmony or symmetry that her attraction lay, but rather in contrast, conflict, rather in the oppressive and half-morbid challenge of her glittering apathy.

"Well," said India, stumbling about among his words. "Another term gone, eh? Only one more year here, daughter. Then where?"

"Why do you call me 'daughter'?"

Because he was staggered India made first to pass it over. "Have you thought at all what college you'd like? Smith? Vassar?" But then, gone to pieces, he tried again to throw a rough arm around her, and again it failed to

"stick", tumbled down, and hung at his side. "Why do I call you—call you—*'daughter'?*"

"Why do I call you and mother 'father' and 'mother'?"

"Fern, wherever have you managed to pick up this crazy—"

Fern continued to stare, unshaken, at the windows.

"I suppose it's because I've been a coward I've gone on calling you my parents. Because, you see, if you weren't, then how could I live?"

"How could *we* live?"

He hadn't realized even yet how pitilessly ready she was to smash that sort of thing.

"I mean, how could I *live?* How could I eat? What could I dress in? Where could I sleep? Who would there be to pay my bills?"

"Stop it, Fern. Straight off!"

"Unless we could keep on making believe you were my parents, why should you have to worry about me? It isn't as if I were any good to you. It's not as if the money you had to

spend keeping me farmed out year after year—"

"Fern, stop! Money! Why, foolish child—"

"No, I'm not foolish and I'm not a child. Don't you suppose I know how much money it takes? Don't you suppose we've figured it out, every horrid cent of it, Clysta and I? Don't you suppose I know to the dollar what it would have cost at that camp in Maine this coming summer—the one you sent me the catalogue of?"

"You're not going there."

"I know I'm not going there."

"Do you know where you're going this summer, Fern?" This time India's arm "stuck." If Fern had been in a wincing mood it would have made her wince, it caught her shoulders in so heavy a grip. "Do you know where you're spending this summer, Fern India? By God! you're spending it at home."

"No, I am not. That would be a queer thing to do, wouldn't it? I'm no more Flagg's sister

now than I was six years ago; not half so much. If I was a bad thing for—a worry—you know what I mean—then, when I was only a child and Flagg was not yet ten years old, why, now—"

"*Flagg!*"

The girl might have laughed to see his face. She did laugh under his arm, thinly, shaking her shoulders in a bitter humor. But it was not at India with his hanging jaw.

"It is funny, isn't it? Me, a worry, that way. Because I hate boys. I detest and loathe them. They disgust me, just as they do Clysta. I'd rather have a toad touch me, far. I know a few things about boys. They're nasty, and I hate nastiness. They're a million times as nasty, what they think and do, as girls." A shiver of amusement. "To imagine *me*, a danger for *Flagg*."

India made an effort to speak clearly and slowly.

"You're all wrong, Fern. Will you believe me when I tell you you've been making up a

lot of things in your mind that are so far from the truth they would be funny if they weren't such a mess? The time has come now when I can tell you what it's all about. You're old enough—"

"I'm afraid I'm much too old. I'm old enough now to know that if you make up long enough, and hard enough, and honest enough, you'll end by making up the truth. There was a while when I would have been as glad as anything if you'd told me that two plus two made five."

"That settles it. This summer, home!"

"'Home'? . . . Forgive me, I didn't want to say it that way. I do thank you, and mother. I am grateful. Perhaps some day I can show you. But I've decided. I'm not going to be in school another year; that's what I'm trying to tell you. Clysta has invited me up home with her for a little while now, and I'm going. Then she and I are going to start out on our own. We can both say we're eighteen and get away with it, and they're looking everywhere

for girls for the munition factories. And once I'm working—once I feel that I'm—"

"Fern, are you trying to rag your father, who adores you? You heard what I said a moment ago. You're spending this summer with us at home."

"I've told you."

"But you see, my funny darling, you can't tell *me* you're eighteen. And so, seriously, I've still some right to say what and where you—"

"Try!"

India looked at her, who had all this while not looked once at him.

"Why, Fern India!"

He laughed. He lifted the hand that was on her further shoulder to give her a gentle whack. But once dislodged his arm had lost the power of "sticking." For the third time it slithered down and hung from his shoulder, dead. He felt queer.

"Let's walk around a bit."

Fern acquiesced, falling in step without a word.

The school grounds seemed enormous. Wherever there were trees there were hundreds of paper lanterns, dozens of colors. It was like walking through so many crazy-work quilts. Now the Gym, with its smothered music and rectangular yellow eyes, was here; now, sliding around under cover of the foliage, it turned up over there. A flower-bed was made in the shape of a star, full of pansies. When India passed it for the fourth time he realized why it was he was getting nowhere. He and Fern were walking in circles.

"Daughter," he said, coming to a stand, "I'm tired to-night. I wonder if anyone would mind if I escaped. Tell Flagg, when you see him, that he'll have to get back to the hotel by himself. I'll humble myself before the powers in the morning; I'm sure it will be all right."

"You had a coat."

"I'll pick it up to-morrow, when we come for you."

He waited a moment.

"About ten or ten-thirty, Fern, in the morning. If you'll have your duds ready to be taken then. Our train's at eleven-twenty-five."

Still the girl said nothing.

He had never left her without kissing her before.

Those gates! He had learned to hate those gates. Peeping back when he was almost to them he saw that Fern had not moved from her place beside the star-shaped pansy bed. But in the mixed light of the lanterns, like a wraith, Clysta Spencer had reappeared.

When, at half past ten next morning, after dodging about for ten minutes in the confusion of the school's exodus, India was told that his daughter had left with Miss Spencer on the "nine-two" for the north, his first thought was for Flagg. Letting nothing happen to his face but a pout of unimportant surprise, he said as he piloted the mystified boy away: "So she changed her mind back again, after all. Her room-mate wanted her over the week-end, and

I said she might go, but last night I thought she had definitely decided not to— Hullo, there, taxi! What the devil! Don't forget you're ours. . . . Come on, sonny, move your feet."

To himself, settled in the car for the station, he said: "I must telegraph, immediately." He was thoroughly dazed. It was only after hundreds of yards that the thought came to him: "But I don't even know where this Clysta person lives." And next, "Then too, I mustn't let Flagg see me wiring." And finally, at the station: "There's all the time in the world. Take it easy, old man. Don't even try to do anything until you get home."

And all the while, deep down cold in the bottom of his heart, the certainty was growing: "What's the use?" It was like the on-creeping of paralysis. "What real right have I?" But it was more than the moral question of right; it was a question of might. He remembered Fern standing there on the lawn last night, sud-

denly adult, unshakable, untouchable, saying, "Try!"

He knew already that he would not try. Fern was gone.

Anne was gone too. And as for Rex . . .

The train rolled down through the windings of the hills, a less-than-second-rate train, jolting, rattling. The coach was dusty and overcrowded with people and flies. Soldiers, dull young drafts returning to their camps, took turns in going to the toilet. Reappearing, each time, their eyes were redder and their feet clumsier, for the bottles hidden in the bulges of their tunics they would presently have to throw away, and they wanted to make the best of what time they had. Flagg looked out of the window.

It was a queer place (or was it?) for Rip Van Winkle to wake up.

Sam Henry India, 3d, he was a fortunate man. He lived at peace in the house of his fathers. Of the woman he loved he had begotten children to live in peace there when he

was gone. He had made of himself five, and each of the five was five, and altogether they made one, and the one was proud. Proud of its past, proud of its present, proud of its home, spacious and gracious and strong, proud of the friendship of its encircling friends. And brave, too. Let the years come. Let them, when they were ripened, fall, one by one. Bud and flower and green fruit there would always be on that tree.

Sam India, the dreamer, rubbed his eyes open in the bad air of the day-coach. He moved his limbs and groaned. Robbed and beaten and left alone. How long since?

Fern was gone. How long since? Years.

Anne, his wife, was gone. When he faced it, how long was it since they had last touched hands, really? Years and years.

Rex? Rex, he knew, had never been.

The house of his fathers?

The friendship of his friends? He counted them over, his sight cleared and his heart sinking. He wondered if it was because they had

seen what was befalling him as he had not. He remembered Joe Coffin and Maynard Wills and the Benedictine. He wondered bitterly if it's not until rats begin to leave the sinking ship that you can see that they're rats.

One minute a rich man. Another, disinherited, stripped, cast out in the world, aimless, all alone.

He had not forgotten Flagg, there beside him. He'd been saving him, that's all. A straw. Flagg was not gone.

He looked around covertly at the boy. He saw what he had never seen before, that the reason Flagg was still his was that of them all Flagg alone was an India. Flagg was he. The same hair, same eyes, same way of carrying himself, good-natured and a fool for faith.

A man will fight for his life. It came to India that this boy was more than his life; he was his immortality. And now, something rising in him that had never been there before, savage, bludgeoning, pitiless, high and happy, he knew that he would fight.

"Flagg!" he cried.

The boy gave a jump and studied him obliquely, eyes wide.

That was no way to go about it. Gently, cunningly. No need of dramatics. They were too much alike, these two. They had always been too close, father and son, to need the spoken word.

"Flagg, there's no diner on, is there? I could eat."

"No, father, I looked, and there's none."

After that for a long while nothing was said. India sat tight. He felt curiously peeled-down, cool, renewed, alert, square-shouldered. Even though he had never been willing to realize it, it was good to feel at last that there was nothing behind his back but a wall.

Flagg was the first to speak, as they were getting down into the flatter land toward home. One of the soldiers, far gone, was coming back from his swigging in the toilet. Lurching, he caught at India's shoulder.

Flagg whirled at him. "You dirty dog!"

Here was something Flagg had then that India had never known. It blew over him like a chill little wind. He wagged his head, looking after the retreating drunk. "Poor fellow! Poor kid!"

"Poor! It's his own fault, father. If he wants to be a dog, a pig!"

India sat still.

"Anybody that wants to drink, father, is a pig. And a fool, too. If only they knew what they looked like inside—what that poison does to their stomachs—all red and warts and boils."

"Who told you that, son?"

"Why, everybody knows it. It's in my physiology book at school, the pictures. And mother says it's so."

"Says it to you? Or just to Rex?"

"Why to both. What's the difference?"

"Flagg, take a good look at me. Do I look as though I had warts and boils on the lining of my stomach?"

"Well—no—" The boy's face reddened.

His eyes went to his knees. He had been caught, and his embarrassment made him sulk. "No, I don't—I don't think so. But then—you quit drinking, you see."

"I—*quit drinking?*"

It was awful, but Flagg was in for it now.

"Why, yes, you did, father. When mother wanted you to."

Then: "Father!" And there was Flagg, Flagg now, examining him with a fearful doubt. "Father, you *have* stopped drinking, haven't you? Rex *is* all off, isn't he? You don't—he's just pipe-dreaming when he tries to make out you're having liquor and things in there, after we're upstairs. In the library, I mean, with your coffee. When men come."

India put his knuckles into his eyes. Flagg now. Flagg, too. And he said to himself, as his father had once said, "*Mea culpa!*"

"Son," he said, "I wonder if you would do something for me. I wonder if, when we get home this afternoon, you'd sit down and have a good, long, lazy jaw with me, about almost

anything—baseball, U-boats, elephants, whatever you feel like—over a good glass of beer?"

"Like—Boches?"

Tears of sweat prickled out on India's temples.

"Of sauterne, then. That's wine, and French."

It was awfuller than ever, but worse than ever Flagg was in for it.

"No, I won't. Why, father!" The revulsion, sweeping him back to relief, was pathetic. A painful grin. An imploring chuckle. "Huh! Don't you suppose I know you're just trying to string me along? Huh-huh!"

India sat and stared at the dirty plush of the seat before him, fascinated by his own helplessness. Flagg grew earnest again.

"But, father, no fooling. Why, when you've given it up, do you have to keep that stuff in the house still? I don't see. Miss Farley—she's our physiology teacher—she says she supposes it must be for medical purposes. But, Gosh, all *that!* I couldn't swallow that hardly

any more'n I could the way mother got out of it."

"What did your mother say?"

"Well, she said—I suppose she thought she had to—but she told us there wasn't any down there any more. She said that place in the cellar was all empty, because you'd thrown it all away. But—only—only you see, Rex and I knew different. You see, we—we were down there a couple—well—several times. You see, we found out where the key was kept— "

"You mean Rex found out where the key was kept. Don't you, Flagg?"

" —the key was kept, and so we went down and opened the door—"

"Why?"

"Oh, to look. Just because we— Oh, just for the devil of it, I guess. Only, father, once, we did something. We took something."

"A drink?"

"*No!* We took a—a—a bottle—of something."

"Rex took it?"

"We took it and carried it out, and we buried it, up behind the old dog-kennel. We dug a hole and buried it. We put a big rock on top of it. It—it's there still."

The brakes were squealing for the yards at Stonebridge. India went along the aisle. He felt as if he would like to touch the shoulders of the people in the seats he passed, as that tipsy soldier had done. It was not until he and Flagg were waiting in the vestibule for the full stop that he remembered he was a mutineer. At last he was going to fight.

India armed himself, on his way home in the station taxi, to meet Anne.

He had long been used to the feeling of having her look at him as from a distance, calculatingly. In the easy and perhaps a little unimaginative tenor of his loyalty, never yet having fathomed the depths of her zealotry, he had wondered how she could manage it, with her husband of seventeen years. Now, hit on the head, he could see. Cornered, angered, he

found he could put *her* away and look *her* over in the three dimensions of the desperate fact. He discovered at last that he could say: "Why, damn it! whose house, whose family, whose life is this, anyhow?"

Armed, then, there was almost more of regret than of relief in finding on their arrival that Anne was not at home. They had the news from Rex, who met them at the door. Mother had gone into New York for the day, and Hames was to meet her with the car at the six-forty train.

The boy's face was imperturbable. Secretive by nature (or of some deep necessity) he would have been the last to show he was moved by the fact that, for the first time in his life, and for seven whole hours, his mother had hazarded leaving him to his own devices. Why shouldn't she? He was getting to be a big fellow now.

But the breath between his lips was not so easy a thing to control. Whether in eagerness

or in something else, to get to that door to meet them he had had to scurry.

India questioned him, firmly kind. "What've you been doing, old man?"

"Oh, playing."

India started for the stairs with his hat on, but then bethought himself. "Easy! No matter what else, take it easy." So he took time to hang up his hat. He took more, and sat down on a step. "You fellows," he said, "I wonder if you've ever realized that this house you live in is your house, just as much as it's mother's and mine. Eh? I mean—every bit of it. Every last room of it. I hate locked doors, don't you?"

Seeing them mystified and embarrassed, he slapped his leg. He chuckled and made an antic of running upstairs. He had been pawing things over in an upper drawer of his bureau for some seconds, with a growing sensation of hollowness, before he became aware that his younger son had followed him.

"Looking for something, father?"

"I'm looking for something that should be in here, a small brass key."

"Mother says I'm better at finding things than you are. Let me look."

It took Rex but a nervous moment. "Is this the one?"

India studied him as he stood there, the wine-room key he had been so clever in "finding" held aloft, his eyes steady, unwinking, and opaque. It gave the father a turn, as it always did. With an equal abruptness it had changed the whole color of his plans. Until now, his mind centered on Flagg, he had hardly thought of what he was to do with Rex.

He spoke so calmly that it sounded light.

"Why, Rex, old fellow, why did you suppose I minded your having that key? Didn't I say the whole house was yours? Put it back in your pocket, where you had it when you came upstairs, and come along with me."

In the gloom of the cellar stairway he had to repeat it to them both.

"Come on along, fellows; no bears down here. Furnaces don't bite."

"One reason I hate locked doors," he ran on, as he turned the key in the wine-room oak, "is that you have the bother of unlocking them. And another," he said, grinning around at the awe-stricken pair, "is that it makes you think how nice it would be if you didn't have to have servants about the place, strange people you can't altogether trust with your valuables. Otherwise, if there were just the four of us, we could throw all our locks away. . . . Enter, gentlemen. . . . What's the matter, lost your legs?"

He could have wept, he could have groaned to see them. What he had to do, no matter if it killed him, was to keep a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes.

"This room," he said, when he had got them in and seated on upturned cases, Rex as quiet as a white rabbit, and Flagg, open-mouthed, stealing gingerly glances around and around, "this room," he said, "was built by your great-

grandfather. Part of the wine he put into it for safe-keeping he made from vines he set out himself, along the hill here to the south. His name was the same as your father's, but he was a better man. When he died, the Legislature at Hartford was adjourned for a day. It would have given him a great deal of pleasure to have been able to see you two boys, the sons of his own son's son.

"He got a lot of fun out of his life, your great-grandfather. He loved his friends, his land, good books, good wine. Like hundreds and hundreds of millions of people since the world began, he drank what wine he felt he wanted every day of his life. So did his son, your grandfather. Neither of them ever had the kind of stomachs your physiology books show you. It never entered their heads to become drunkards. It never entered their heads even to be afraid they might. They respected themselves, and they respected their wine, too much for that. They weren't going to be tempted to make pigs of themselves with liquor,

because they knew that if they did they would be shabby and silly, just as they knew that if they swilled too much food at meals they would be pasty and fat. Your great-grandfather had one funny thing about him; he couldn't eat honey. It gave him blotches and stomach-aches. He didn't like either blotches or stomach-aches, so he didn't eat honey, though he was fond of it, and always kept bees. Rex, my son, come here."

Choosing a bottle from one of the racks, India got the cork out. It was a common claret, dry with age. With a clean handkerchief he dusted a trying-glass and filled it a quarter full. He had to reach down for Rex's hand, for, though the boy's face was a mask of nonchalance, his arm had turned to wood. Wrapping the fingers around the tumbler, India said: "You know, Rex, that I would rather be killed than hurt you. You know you can believe what I say. I want you to take at least a sip of this. I'll tell you why afterwards. Taste it. No, Rex, I mean it. Now!"

Sullenly, covering his fright by a show of disdain, Rex sipped. The shock he had, though, was too much for his trumped-up stoicism. He gagged and made an awful face.

"Yes, son. That's what I was going to tell you. You've been told that this stuff was poison and that it was sour. You believed the first, but you've never quite believed the second. Now you do.

"No, don't be sick yet. There's something else we've all got to get through our heads. Listen tight. You and Flagg came in here, two boys alike. But the truth is you're not two boys alike, and the sooner we realize you're not, and can't be treated—can't treat yourselves—alike, the better for all concerned.

"You're built one way, Rex; Flagg's built another. It seems to me better to look at it straight, so, than to try and get around it by saying that the things that are bad for you—like honey for your great-grandfather—are bad for you both, and for everybody. Are you listening, Rex?

"You don't like wine. You'll never like it. It will always make you sick. Now that you've found that out, it's up to you. The key to this room will always be in that bureau drawer up there. But from now on there won't be any fun in your coming down here, because now you know there's nothing mysterious or exciting or devilish locked up here. Only some kind-of-vinegary stuff that doesn't happen to agree with you. You're a fine boy and you've got some sense.

"But even if you hadn't, even if you were to get that key to-morrow and come down here and swig a lot of this sour stuff you loathe, just for instance to be perverse and naughty, it wouldn't be *naughty*. There's the joke of it. It would simply be baby foolishness. I shouldn't think of punishing you. All I should do, I should have to hand you over to the doctor to cart off to some place where it's their business to take care of fellows with trick stomachs who aren't proud enough to take care of themselves.

"But that's not you, Rex. You're doing

too well with yourself, getting big, and muscly, and rather handsome. Not you! . . . So skedaddle now and be sick in the bathroom and forget it. . . . Out you go!"

As he stood hearkening to the fleeing feet on the stairs outside, India felt weakness like water pouring through the hollows of his bones, an exhaustion, as if he had run a Marathon. Being defenseless, everything attacked him. He remembered that Fern was gone. No, not as if he had run a Marathon, but as if he had been beaten with a hundred clubs.

But then as he turned around to face the second half of the job he had undertaken, all in a lung-full he got his second wind.

"Flagg," he cried, "we're all right."

He stood with his feet spread, his hands in his pockets.

"I hope you heard what I was giving Rex. It's as important for you and for me to realize he's not us. More important. Sometimes it won't hurt a sick man to imagine he's well, but for a well man to get the notion he's ailing is

pretty darned bad business. That's why I distrust this dodge—like your physiology pictures and the old horrible-example lectures—this dodge for scaring weak people strong. It's too apt to scare strong people weak in the process. It's just as if, because the Prices' boy has to walk on those crutches of his, all the kids in school had to be made to believe they must walk on crutches. When they learned the hang of it, perhaps fewer of them would stumble and bark their shins at play. But I'd hate to think of their baseball team. I'd hate worse to think of the team they'd have down there thirty or sixty years from now, wouldn't you?

"What I'm trying to say, son, is this. You're a husky fellow; you're sound; I know you, because I know your line. Whatever you choose to do, that's your own business. But what I won't have, I won't have a lot of goblin-scared people scaring you with their goblins. Immediately anyone sets you up a goblin, Flagg, you grab hold of it. Take it between your own hands, look it over with your own eyes, find

out whether it's something you can't handle, whether it's something a lot of other humans haven't been able to handle fairly successfully, without necessarily having to screech bloody-murder and strangle it to death. . . . Do I sound like a spouter, Flagg? Hot air? Well, there's one thing about spouting, it makes a man dry."

Pouring two glasses of the wine this time, he set one on the deal flap of the bottling-sink near Flagg's elbow. The other he lifted to the ray from the small high window to try its color with a museful eye. "Here's to your good luck, Flagg, old man." He tasted his own, savored, and drank down a third of it.

Flagg had been a long while getting his voice. He showed the whites of his eyes as he cornered them at the glass at his elbow.

"Father, you don't mean that for *me?*"

"Why not?"

"You—you don't mean I've got to have it!"

"Lord, no! Take it or leave it, son, that's as you choose. You're old enough to do your

own choosing. There are plenty of countries in which you'd have your own wife and children by now. All I want you to know, as between gentlemen, is that it won't make any fatal difference either way."

"Father!" There was a half-passionate, half-wondering challenge in it now. "You mean to say you don't mind—seeing me *drink?*"

"*Drink?*" And now there was passion for India. "The only thing I mind is hearing you say that word that way. Because that's the way boys say it who afterwards die drunkards. Devil-worship! Fetishism, if ever there was! If you've really been made to feel as shivery as that, Flagg, I'd prefer you would give your glass at least a try."

"Would it—would it hurt me?"

"You've lived with me the best part of sixteen years, Flagg."

"Would I—would I like it, do you think?"

"I don't know. It's not by any means the

best in the cellar. It's not the worst, though. It's probably as good a wine as nine-tenths of the saints and heroes of history ever tasted in their lives; probably a lot better than the wine Christ and his disciples had up for their last supper together. Yes, it has a certain pride, of its kind."

India looked around to find Flagg with a gulp in his mouth, his cheeks swollen, his eyes as big as hotel butter-plates. It was enough to make a mourner laugh. India doubled over and slapped his thigh.

"Swallow it, you idjit! Swallow it down, you funny kid. It's not dynamite."

Flagg swallowed. He sat there flushed, suspicious, waiting. He sat there ready in another moment to begin to grin.

But then his eyes grew bigger still. A sudden pallor swept the pinkness from his face. Fascination, panic, guilt.

India wheeled to look where the boy was looking. There in the open doorway of the wine-cellar stood Anne.

India walked toward his wife. Confused, thinking only of Flagg and of this disaster to Flagg, he paid less attention than he should have paid to her posture and her look. He hardly saw her, indeed, as more than an incongruous presence, a monkey wrench thrown into the works, a wretched blunder.

"Oh, damn the luck!" he swore to himself. Then: "Easy, though! No scenes. Don't upset him any more. Carry it off."

So, waving his hands at her, he warned her laughingly: "Gentlemen only. Flagg and I are having a good old carouse. Upstairs with you, Mrs. India, where ladies belong."

It was simpler than he had dared hope. Anne seemed to take it. Without a word she unblocked the doorway and withdrew. India followed her out into the greater cellar, embroidering his whimsey. "Flagg and I are most extremely busy, madam, taking the Devil to pieces to see how he—"

But there was Anne, facing him.

"A carouse!" She had followed his words no further than that.

India's chin sagged. "Good Lord, dear, you didn't suppose I meant it!"

"You don't know what you mean. Please go along quietly upstairs."

"Are you talking to—do you mean—me?"

"Please go along quietly upstairs."

He had lived with her too long to know her. Familiarity breeds also blindness. He looked beyond her at the furnace, an antique hot-air affair. In the underground dimness, which might have been the dimness under the sea, with its swollen body and all its tentacles searching out through the shadows overhead, it might have been the mother of all the devil-fish. And when India brought his eyes back to his wife they seemed to see her faintly fluorescent, like the denizen of another element, her faculties attuned to other waves, her spirit naked to other passions, beliefs, desires, angers, than his. For an instant he felt his utter helplessness. Then he remembered Flagg.

"It is you," he said, whitening about the hinges of his jaws, "who will go along, quietly. And I mean it, quietly. Rex is behind you, half way up the stairs, listening. So let's not have—anything."

"Rex?" Here it was at last. "What do you care, Sam? What's Rex to you?"

"A son."

"Words! Words! You know they're words. Are you willing to fight for Flagg?"

"I'm fighting for Flagg now."

"For Flagg, who doesn't need it. I've been fighting for Rex, who does need it, since the day he came. Doggedly, bitterly, giving him everything I had. *Your* son! What have *you* given him?"

India fought that off. He'd be damned if he'd be touched there this time. And then she had saved him, for her next words were: "If it had been Fern, now—"

"We'll not bring Fern into this."

There was a flame in her pupils. She had

cast off the cool garment of the nun at last and stood out, giving no quarter.

"I shall bring into this what it serves me to bring. It's simpler to fight you in the open than in the ambush you've kept for all these years. I'll say what I must say; I'll go where I must go, Sam, even if I have to go alone. For I am right. . . . Flagg! Come out of that room."

"Flagg, stay in that—"

But the boy must have been poised on his toes behind the very door, for he was out and past them and like a tall scared shadow up the stairs.

Hotness swept India. He spoke through his teeth. "Now, Anne, you've gone and done it."

"To *stay done*."

With a shift, amazing in its speed, her large, white, electric body had outflanked him. The door to the wine-room slammed. The key was turned in the lock, withdrawn, imprisoned in a fist.

He stared at the fist.

"Give me that."

"I will not give you that."

"By God, Anne, you will."

"If God is the God I think, I will not."

In the rock-walled place their voices rang hard and loud, like equal swords, pitiless for the right.

Halfway up the stairs, in the gloom of the landing, four eyes and four ears were big. The sense of the weight of them bore India's shoulders down. He stayed himself. He counted twenty. He spoke in a lowered tone.

"Anne, listen. I'm going to have that door open, and I'm going to have it left open the rest of my life. No, I say, listen. Do you remember when we used to say in fun, in irony: 'Hang your clothes on the hickory limb, but don't go near the water'? I've lost one child, a daughter; I know now I'm in danger of losing a son by the same kind of drowning, too, some day, simply because I've been weak enough to let that damned thing be drummed into their ears and souls. 'Water' of one kind

or another, there's 'water, water everywhere.' What I'm trying to say to Flagg now before it's too late is: 'Learn to swim. Then go about your business, wherever in the world your business takes you, like a man, and quit your worrying.' "

"Very fine. But what you close your eyes to is that you've another son who is so made that he *can't* learn to swim. Not ever."

India took it standing up. This time, no matter how it hurt, he would neither wince nor turn. He had something to stick to, and he stuck grimly.

"The water to drown him will always be there."

"It will not be there!" Anne's voice broke bounds. Bodily, of a sudden, the woman was magnified. "Not if I—not if the thousands and millions of mothers who have borne sons—"

"It has been there, Anne, for thousands and millions of years."

"That's what they said of slavery, until Lincoln signed—"

"Now you twist and pervert your reasoning. There's no analogy between the two things. Lincoln said: 'No man shall be master of another man.' You say: 'No man shall be master of himself.'"

"Bosh, Sam! Words mean so little. I've been too deep. *I know.*"

"I'm going deep, myself, Anne. Is 'Bosh!' all you have to say?"

"No. I have to say, what through selfishness, carelessness, blindness, Sam, you have not been willing to say: 'If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.'"

India was nearly betrayed; he nearly winced this time. "That's not the truth, Anne. I have been willing to say it, until I began to see the hell it was raising in certain—" But there he stopped.

He stopped because a suspicion had struck him. "Smoke screen" were the words that flew

across his mind. He had a sense that it was covering the advance of something hitherto hidden and out-of-all-proportion bigger than the thing he had been fighting till now. His glance went up to the landing. The shadowy witnesses were still there. It came back to the woman, the warring angel, white with the curiously voluptuous glory of the washed-of-earth. It fell to her fist.

"May I have that key now, Anne?"

"No."

"What you're saying then is not '*I* will eat no flesh,' of *yourself*, but it is '*Thou shalt eat no flesh!*'—to *me*."

"If need be. If it comes to the same thing."

"It comes to two things as different as black and white."

"Have your words. I have Rex. And I have the key."

"But now," India said quietly, "I'm going to take it away from you."

"You will have to kill me first."

"Don't!"

It was like cold water, it shocked his nerves more than his mind. The boys up there, spying, listening. In spite of him his attention flew there. When it came back he found Anne moving away. Flexible as a feline in strategy, she knew that retreat served her better now than attack.

The shades that were the boys faded away in flight before her. Behind her, India was pocketed between the walls of the narrow stair. She made no attempt to hurry. Neither did he. His mood was fixed now. There would come the time when she would have to turn and stand.

He failed to realize what she was up to, until, as she stepped out of the front door ahead of him, he saw her describe a swift arc with her arm. When he got out beside her, her fist was open, her hand empty, her face once more the nun's.

He looked around him at all the miniature wilderness into which the thrown key might have fallen, the shrubberies, flower-beds,

patches of longer grass. For a moment he felt heavy all over, his body, his limbs, his mind. Heavy as battered lead.

India felt the weight pressing him down, bidding him rest.

There was a duplicate key to the wine-cellar, somewhere, put away for keeping with all the odds and ends of other unused things. It might have taken him an hour to find it. What alternative, then? He might take a crowbar to that door down there. He might do a dozen things that would be spectacular and violent. If it weren't for this weariness in him that kept saying: "You've been fairly beaten. So what's the use?"

Anne knew he was beaten. She had no need to triumph. There was even to shame him the beginning of a misting and softening in the white mail of her rectitude. A kind of "forgiven and forgotten, Sam."

The boys knew he was beaten. The intensity of their interest in the valley, into which they

stood staring from above the hedge beyond the lawn, betrayed their self-consciousness and their dismay. Their backs were too painfully expressive. The shoulders of one were rounded, and held so, quiet, as quiet as a rabbit waiting for a man's feet to go by. That was Rex. The other shoulders were held so square that there seemed to be peaks at the sleeve-tops, as if it were a coat suspended by two clothespins on a line. That was Flagg.

It cleared India's head. He shook himself. One foot, and then the other, he pulled himself out of the slough. He tried his will. He bent his mouth into a grin and showed it to Anne.

"You haven't answered any question. You haven't finished anything."

He went down the steps and walked toward the boys. As he walked, the wisdom of his grandfather recurred to him. "The one thing about drinking that is of importance is that it should be of no importance." There was a dismal humor in this now.

"Well, sons, what do you think of the game?"

They spun around, plainly as startled as if he had given them whacks on their backs, their faces hot and glum. He broadened his smile and crinkled his eyes at the corners.

"You see we're only kids after all, we old ones; we have to have our football games. We make a lot of noise about it, growl, glare, swell out our chests. But you know how that is. It simply means it's a game. Now there's mother. Mother's side has to make horrible faces at the wine-bottle we use for a ball, and growl at it: 'You can't get me, because I'm going to lock you up in a black place and throw the key away.' My side's game is: 'Get *me?* Whoever put such big notions into your head? I guess not! Come out here into the light where I can look at you, and tell you once for all who's who around this house.' . . . Just for the moment mother's cheering section has gone wild, for mother's just scored. But time's not up, by a long shot. My team has sworn a

horrible swear that by the time the whistle blows there'll be a bottle of some sort on the dinner-table, sitting mild and singing small. . . . Am I down-hearted, sons? Do I get any bets from either of you?"

Poor boys, they were so embarrassed. They looked down at their own feet.

"I don't want you to take sides, you fellows. I just want to know what the odds are. Do you think my side is licked? Should I give up?"

Rex seemed to be studying his shoes, but the eyes in his lowered face slid away to his mother, still standing white on the steps in the light of the falling sun. He was dumb.

"And you, Flagg?"

Flagg jerked up. His face was crimson, tormented, savage.

"Give up? Father!"

"Three cheers and a tiger!" Quite suddenly India's grin was real. "You bet I don't give up. No matter how deep mother thinks it's buried, you watch— By Jingo!" India's hand

went to his head, inside of which he was recollecting words. ". . . behind the old kennel . . . a big rock on top . . ."

It's funny, once a man really *wants* to win.

He chuckled. "Mother may have the heavier line, but when it comes to thinking like lightning, watch my quarterback. You fellows wait right here."

As he marched off toward the rear of the house, the ironic aptness of the accident grew on him. "If you're going to dig up a devil, dig up a proper one—one that's been buried with awful dance and incantation."

He had no trouble in finding the stone that Flagg had told him of, on the far side of the abandoned dog-house up the beginning of the hill. They must have been in reverent earnest; it took all the man's strength to get the slab heaved away.

"Mumbo-Jumbo!" he intoned as he probed the earth with a shingle. "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum!" If he was to do it at all, he was to do it jauntily.

So he found the bottle presently, a squat,

amber-colored one. When he had dusted off the grave-soil he pursed his lips, like whistling. "Scotch! The old 'Cardley's Very Special'! No halfway about those dragon-slayers!"

India sat down on a dog-crate that was there against the wall, feeling suddenly rather gone in the legs. He had had no lunch, and now, though nobody seemed to realize it, dinner was a long time overdue. He continued to study the bottle in his hand, prey to an unexpected fascination.

" 'Thou shalt not!', eh?"

It was his father who had put down the Cardley's. He thought of his father. He re-envisaged his grandfather, the straight-standing, soft-voiced, keen-eyed old man. He wondered what would have been the expression of either of them had someone proposed to lock up any room whatever in *his* house and throw the key away.

Beside the two figures there was a third, his own. It looked not only dwindled but dingy with the poverty of the fag-end son, who,

through sloth and trust and amiability, finds his patrimony bit by bit picked away.

Something had happened to India. He had come out here on account of Flagg. Now he was here on his own account. He had almost forgotten Flagg. His brows gathering in a knot, he studied the bottle.

"I've a mind to make an ass of myself. I've a mind, friend bottle, to lie on my back and tip you up and simply swine-guzzle. It seems to me about the only way I can ever get back my self-respect is to get as drunk as an admiral, here and now."

The idea expanded. "It would be the sacrifice of something I've held valuable, but after all. Damnation! When it comes to the point where a man is told he can't be trusted to know the right from the wrong, may it not be that the only answer that'll make a dent is for him to *prove* he can't, with a lurid vengeance? There's humor there. 'If you wish to take over my job of personal discrimination, of personal responsibility for the valuable body and the

invaluable soul I've been given to carry on with, so be it, you're welcome. And now that I'm clear of it—here goes!" "

India's gaze left the bottle and went up toward the ridge, fevered with his rebel speculations. A moment it was all flame-red up there under the eaves of the woods, the sun setting. "I've a mind to, damn 'em!"

Another moment, and the fire in the woods died. Slowly, then with a rush, the cooler color of dusk came out of the earth and overran the trees.

India put a hand to his head. He let out his breath in a "Whew!"

A smile of self-raillery moved his mouth. "A little bit more, and they'd have had me playing their own game for them."

The smile deepened, taking on an aspect of clearer humor. Holding the bottle at arm's length he wagged his head at it.

"Be damned if they didn't have me awful near to doing you reverence, my friend. A

minute more, and they'd have had us at each other's throats in the dark."

He got up, a little numb at the knees, and stood reflecting.

"That's the dangerous part of too suddenly discovering that you come of fighting stock. It makes it hard to go gently, go gaily."

As he started back toward the house he took the bottle by the neck, like a war-club, or like a jester's thumping bladder, to flourish.

"Grin, fellow, grin!"

Down on the lawn the time seemed endless. Of the three that were there, if Flagg was not the most nervous, then he hid it the least well. Being undivided in his suspense, the fact that his little brother could think of anything else drove him nearly wild. What he wanted most in the world was to be let alone, but as often as he moved, Rex tagged after him. It did no good to growl, "Beat it!" It did no good to lash out, "For Pete's sake, shut up!" All this

seemed to do was to draw still tighter the leading-rope of some mysterious fascination.

Flagg was so simple, and at the same time so mixed up, that it took him a long while to comprehend. When he did, he stood and gaped.

"Huh?"

"How does it?" The inquisitor was trying his best not to writhe, but his eyes for once were nearly shining. "How does it make you feel, now?"

"How does what?"

"What father gave you. All that—you know—all that wine."

"Me?"

"Does it make your head go around? Any?"

"*Me?* Say, what do you think? You make me want to laugh."

"You want to laugh, do you? Is that the way it makes you, Flagg?"

Flagg felt his face purpling. This made him madder than ever, this, and his inarticulate, elephantine helplessness.

"Say! Where do you get that—*I* didn't have any wine. Not enough to—"

"You did too."

"I never. Now you listen: if you think you're kidding me, cut it out. Beat it! Hear me? You beat it, before I—"

Mother was between them. "Flagg!"

"Well, I don't care. He needn't think, just because he's smaller'n I am, he can be so funny. Wine! If that wouldn't make you laugh!"

"It doesn't make me laugh, Flagg. I'm sorry, but I've been watching you."

"Me?" Flagg couldn't help it; now his jaw did hang. "Well, you!" he cried, wheeling on Rex. "You can talk, you had as much as I had."

"I didn't swallow it. I spit it out, mother. If you spit it out, it can't do you any—"

"Spit it out like fun, you did!"

"Boys!"

"I don't care, I only had one swallow."

"I'm afraid, Flagg, you don't know how many swallows you had. That's one of the

things I've tried to tell you. If you'd stop to think, you'd see that something's queer somewhere. What do you suppose it is that makes you seem not quite like Flagg to your brother, and to me? Don't you realize you're acting —and talking— Flagg, son, go in the house, will you?"

Flagg stood and stared.

"Did you hear me? Go in."

"I won't."

"You—*what?*"

"I—I—"

It was hideous. That first stunning defiance was bad enough; but it wasn't that, it was his sudden doubt that was the worst. This sudden feeling of not being absolutely sure. Was it true, or even a tenth true, what mother said? Was that what made him— But he *had* had only one swallow— Or— How much did one need to make one— Was mother, *could* mother be right? Was he, Flagg India, was he actually—

Mother spoke in her North Pole way, brittle and deadly. "Where is your father?"

Flagg's lips were glued together. He had no idea where his father was, but now some weird perversity made him want to make her think he had, and wouldn't tell. And this very perversity, so new in him, deepened the blackness of his mistrust. Had he, then—had he, Flagg India, *been drinking?*

"There's father," Rex announced.

Brick steps to the south of the house led down from the back yard into the flower garden where, as the shadows thinned, now the dusk deepened. Father had come as far as the top of these steps, and there he stood. When he saw the trio on the lawn turn to look up at him he hoisted a thing he had in his hand and waved it at arm's length in the air. And across the distance they heard him chuckling. Merrily, merrily.

Mother studied him for one instant.

"Boys, go into the house. Both of you, I mean."

It was the sort of tone to start them. But when she had started, herself, walking stiff-legged toward the garden and those steps, and when they had reached the first cover of a forsythia bush, somehow they had to halt there, petrified, to wait and watch and listen. So it was that they heard their mother's words, delivered from the garden entrance.

"Sam India, where did you get that bottle?"

So it *was* a bottle. Yes, and he had it by the neck, like a club, and the more wildly he waved it the more merrily he chuckled.

"Sam India," said mother, "you're drunk."

It struck everything as still as death.

"You, of all people, Sam. Beastly, befuddled drunk!"

Out of the silence after that, one sound came, and one only. Behind the forsythia bush Rex tittered. It was the first time he had ever done such a thing out loud in his life. Probably he had no idea what he was doing. It must have been more nerves than anything.

Probably Flagg had no idea what he was

doing, either. He wasn't even aware of the burning of his knuckles until he had been staring down for instants at the form of his brother stretched on the grass under the overhang of the forsythia shoots.

Flagg opened his mouth. "Rex, get up." Rex would not move. The worst of it was that while the figure lay as still as still, the eyes were as wide as wide.

Before Flagg's eyes ran a file of letters, big black newspaper headline capitals.

"BOY DRUNK SLAYS BROTHER."

Flagg stood there and stood there and stood there.

By and by, somewhere on the turf beyond the bush, feet were moving. They were loudening. It was mother, coming to look.

Flagg walked away from the forsythia. When he had gone ten steps he started to run. The front gate was too far off and too public; wriggling through the barberry hedge he let himself down the boundary wall to the road outside. There he mustn't run, the road-metal

was so hard and so loud. So he had to try and walk again.

The fearful thing was the silence. Even when he had got around a turn in the descending road, where from below he could see nothing of the house in which he had lived all his life but a night-grayed gable surmounting the parapet of the hedge, the silence continued unbroken.

Flagg tried to tell himself: "It's because she hasn't found him yet."

Then he began for the second time to run.

"BOY DRUNK SLAYS BROTHER."

Between ten and eleven, on the Boston Post Road between Southport and Fairfield, the hindmost one of a caravan of army trucks pulled out beside the way with a flat tire forward. When the driver had got a spare on, thrown the damaged rubber into the rear of the truck, and taken a chew of tobacco, he saw a boy standing, doing nothing, just inside the red half-circle cast by the tail-light. His head

full of spies and pacifists, the soldier threw the spot of his torch upon the dumb one. Moved then, without quite knowing why, by the boy's look of wildness and weariness, he said: "How about a lift, Bub? If you're going my way, climb in."

"Why—why, I don't—why, thank you very much."

The cab was roomy and black. The soldier drove hard to catch up with the others; the truck clanked and rumbled like a rolling mountain; one had to bellow to be heard. Two or three times, after a passing headlight had swept across, the soldier leaned along the seat and shouted: "Gone to sleep, Bub? All right, only hang on, though."

Ill-luck followed the truck. This time it was a broken fan-belt, out beyond New Haven. When he had succeeded in patching it up and gotten back into the height of the cab, the man took time to study his guest's gray face more intently.

"Looks to me I know what you need, Bub.

If you can keep your trap shut, that is. And I guess you can."

Rummaging under the cushion he brought out a pint flask.

"You take just about one-fifth of a nip of that, son. That'll set the old wheels a-goin' again."

"No-uh-thanks."

"It's good. Needn't be scared of this; I'll guarantee it for the purest rye in New England. Give me by a friend of my wife's I've known like I know my brother. Look-a-here, I'll show you how good *I* think it is."

While the soldier had the flask tipped up above his face, the boy got out of the cab's corner and down the truck's side. He moved as soundlessly as if his hands and feet touched nothing, and as swiftly as if the Devil were after him.

Still like a wraith he entered the underbrush beside the road. He ran through it, keeping his feet somehow, holding his elbows before his face against the whipping branches.

III.

WHEN Rex India was sixteen he looked twenty. If he was slight, and on the short side of medium stature, he bore his one hundred and three pounds with an air that was nearer grace than was ever to have been expected, and nearer a grown man's than a growing boy's.

In his way, with his straight black hair, his white skin, his slate-colored eyes set on either side of a nose that was dominant without being heavy, perhaps because of the sensitiveness of the long narrow nostrils, he was almost passably good-looking. He could be charming, too. More than one stranger, a friend of friends, passing as the guest of an evening through this house where so many subjects were not to be touched upon, carried away the impression of a young man of the world in the phrase's finest sense, unobtrusively considerate and intelli-

gently interested. This meant that Rex was a good listener. With his filmy, unwavering eyes he seemed to understand even more than was said; his mouse-quiet was flattering.

So, it would appear, Anne India was justified. Faith does move mountains. Had Doctor Blakeley still been alive he would have been more than ever edified. More assuredly than ever now, looking at India, his head streaked with gray and the beginnings of hollows behind his ears, and then looking at the self-immolating mother, a trifle heavier perhaps, but her carriage elastic, her eyes quick and clear, her heavy crown of hair still as immaculate in its blackness as if a magic had been done for her alone in time and space, and her shell of youth hardened and brightened to last out her need, Blakeley could have wagged a wise head. "Sacrifice doesn't work that way, my friend. Just look at her."

He could have added, of Rex, "Look at *him*." Of the child he had helped bring into

the world he could have said, "There's nothing left. You wouldn't know it for the same human unit. Thanks to a fighting love, there's nothing left to tell."

If this was an error it was a forgivable one: the scurfy patch on the side of the scalp had been so long hidden by the boy's hair that nothing short of another doctor's examination would have told it was still there.

This other doctor was Doctor Kantor, the man called in hurriedly on the night the Indias' elder son disappeared, leaving the younger knocked out on the ground. The physician divined that there had been trouble, but that being outside his business, and his clients the Indias, he never referred to it. It was in the course of his scrutiny of the scalp in search of some contusion which might account for the boy's continuing unconsciousness that he noticed the horny spot. Even then he did not mention it, being more fully preoccupied with the sudden growth of a theory which would have had him believe the nearly unbelievable. And this

was that, for all his professional acumen, he was being taken in by an adolescent boy. The conclusion to which he was forced at length was that his patient was not now, and had not been, unconscious at all, but rather held in a state not unlike catalepsy, self-induced, strongly perverse, whether positive (a demand for frightened solicitude) or negative (a defense of his own reason against the incredible fact that he who was untouchable had been knocked flat down) he, the doctor, could not say.

It was not till weeks later that Kantor, having put two and two together a number of times, mentioned the scar of the infantile horn to India.

"It should have been operated at an early stage. It would have been fairly simple then. Now it is a considerably more serious undertaking."

India asked how serious. Kantor would not measure the chances.

"I'll only say that at the worst, providing

the patient survived, there might be paralysis with loss of faculties. That's the gamble."

"At the best?"

"There, too. Cranial surgery, even if it's come a long way from the hocuspocus of the bump-doctors, doesn't yet know everything. It does know, however, that where there's exostosis there's apt to be pressure, and where there's pressure there's something that shouldn't be."

Kantor cogitated. "He's an emotional type."

"What does that signify?"

"Probably nothing. Still, if he were to have a blood-clot anywhere in his system, and if it were dislodged, an area of pressure in the brain like that would be a fine place for it to land up in. And of course that would mean—" Kantor snapped his fingers. "Out!"

India had to think for a while before he told Anne. He had to undertake to climb over a barrier built high now between them. Also, the burned child shuns fire.

When he had come to it, Anne was for a

moment drawn out by this wild new turn of hope. Caught off guard, she was taken by an excitement so powerful that it seemed an anguish. Little by little, though, as she learned the hard terms of the transaction, in the odds they must all agree to face, her composure returned.

"No, no, Sam, chances as slim as that aren't worth the taking."

Her face began to shine again with the serene and glacial light of its inflexible devotion. Relief? Well, there's always a factor of relief.

"We're going at it another way, Sam, slower perhaps. But see Rex now. We're winning."

Yes, India had a sense of relief there, the sense of a grasping at a reprieve, as if for a moment it had been Anne's own life and reason for living that had been in danger of being wrested away from her. He had the extraordinary thought: "What would she have left then? What would become of her?"

India might have been expected to ask of himself, "What have *I* left? What is to become of *me?*"

The question as to why he stayed on in the house when staying on as he did, a sociable man turned solitary, grimly deferential in all the minor physical details of a home-life built to the needs of Rex alone, was to all appearance a confession of his defeat, is too complex a one to be served by a single answer.

There was his feeling about the house, buried as deep in India as any other inherited instinct. Unreasonable, perhaps, with more than a hint of perversity in it, possibly, a strong sense of loyalty to the hearth-and-rooftree of his line bade him take any punishment rather than be driven out. Hold the fort! "Don't give up the ship!" Perhaps he was able to wring a smile out of the ironic humor of that—the spectacle of himself, posed glum and indomitable, holding a fortress that anyone else would have said had been conquered, looted, burned

down around him, rebuilt and occupied by the enemy, years ago.

There was another reason for his seeming acceptance of defeat, and this was that he was not defeated; now that he had realized the weight of the force against him he was not. His predilection having been for frontal attacks and cavalry charges, he had not got his own strength until he learned to "dig in." There are some battles that he who waits wins.

India was not strictly waiting, however, not in the negative sense, these years.

As far as anything articulate that passed between India and Anne was concerned, Fern and Flagg might nearly as well have been dead. The girl definitely, the boy progressively, like ships strayed in the dark from the close formation of a war-time ocean convoy; once down beyond the horizon they must be marked off, abandoned to their own devices, their very names forgotten for morale's sake in the desperate task of getting the remnant fleet to port.

Once in the second year after their defection their names were remembered for a moment. A letter addressed to Flagg, a piece of advertising sent out on the old mailing-list of some stamp-and-coin house, turned up one morning in the postman's handful. Anne passed it on to India with his share. For a while he stood there balancing it on his palm, a process of speculation at work in his eyes.

"I'm wondering." Something a little like a smile played about his mouth.

Anne was betrayed into curiosity. "Wondering what?"

"Wondering how it would be if I were to forward this."

"Forward— You don't mean to tell me you know where Flagg *is*."

"You don't mean to tell me you imagined I'd be standing where I'm standing here, all this while, if I didn't. If I hadn't kept *some* track of them."

"Fern too?" Anne was getting deeper than she liked. "Where?—" But there she bit her

lip. She recommenced coldly, "Are they all right?"

"All right is a pretty large order for kids of their age cutting out on their own in the world. No, I'd hardly call them all right."

Anne was caught once more, despite herself. "I've always wondered, Sam, knowing you, how it could be you should make no move to get them—Flagg especially—back again."

"Because, Anne, whatever they may be up against, they're better off there than here."

Anne got her distance and her poise before she spoke. Her tone was as level as pond ice. "I agree with you. It won't hurt either of them to have to fight a little. They're both strong and healthy, both given good sound stuff to begin with. Unquestionably, I think so too."

India stood and studied her, his glance even with hers. He had to shake his head.

"I wonder," he said, "if I shall ever succeed in being amazed enough."

. . . . . .

Flagg India was a heavy fellow when he had got his growth. On account of his sandy hair he was known among the workmen in the boat-yard in New Bedford as "the big Swede." Sometimes he was known to the foreman as "you big bum." This would be when, on a very blue Monday morning, the fair-headed caulker turned up in a trouble-hunting mood, his eyes discolored, his thoughts tangled, his fists aching to take it out on somebody, as if in breaking another's head he could break his own clear.

"You big bum," the foreman would apostrophize him, "you better begin to use the soft pedal around here or pretty quick you'll be outside looking in."

Flagg didn't care. "Go on fire me. Or else don't keep harping on it."

More than once Jacobson was on the point of letting a cat out of a bag. He could have made this big bum sit up if he had wanted to retort, "If it wasn't for your old man's wanting me to keep an eye on you, you crazy kid."

Crazy kid. That was what saved him. Among other and less gracious qualities, Jacobson had a sense of humor. Flagg India, born of a line of carefully nurtured and highly civilized people, matured slowly. Ruggedly built, well muscled, unquestionably a man in stature, Flagg at nineteen was still a boy. He had the look of it; he could still flush hotly; the mask of devil-may-care he put on to hide his confusions, vacillations, and mercurial despairs was as transparent as glass; it was comical.

His week was like the curve of a graph, and any one might have been laid over any other without showing a radical variation. Starting from the depths of Monday, it reached its peak on Thursday. By Thursday he had settled it. "Never again, so help me!" He worked enormously, with a satisfaction of the hands, hummed and whistled, played amiable tricks and cracked spleenless jokes on everybody. Things about him took on beauty. The racing hull on which he worked smote his eyes and through his eyes his heart with its whole fitness

and symmetry; dinner at the "dog-wagon" tasted like a rough ambrosia; supper at Mrs. Sousa's better still.

On Friday, to the uninitiated eye, the curve would have seemed still to be ascending. Flagg's gaiety was intensified; so was the violence of his labor. But now his jokes grew far-fetched and shrill, and the over-swung blows of his maul left half the work spoiled behind him.

Then Saturday.

In a way, all Saturdays were alike. In other ways, of course, they were different. Here was a Saturday in mid-December. All the houses and all the buildings, yards, factories were a dirty brown against the dirty gray of the slush. It was so bad one had to think there must be some way of escaping from it, like rubbing one's eyes and waking up.

Lincoln Silva, who had been in the A.E.F., and who was now a clerk at the yard, a round-shouldered, close-eyed, rather handsome fellow

who prided himself on "never letting anything get by," thought they "needed something."

"Mike's got some down at the wagon."

"The hell with the wagon; I'm going to the pictures."

"Pictures! Say, grow up!"

"All right, go where you want to." Flagg's chin was away out in front of his face. "I'm going to the pictures."

He swung around and walked up the street, humming a tune. Slush, slush, slush. The raw, dirty, early dark. It was still an hour before suppertime; up where the stores were there were still crowds of people going in and out, shopping for Christmas. A whole hour yet. Shopping for Christmas. People, people.

"I hope this time he doesn't come, the bastard!"

Flagg walked on, his hands in his pockets, stubborn shoulders squared, hat on the back of his head. He stopped to look in a hardware window. He used the window as a mirror, cornering an eye. It was a poor sort of straw

to catch at in the ocean of loneliness, but it was a straw: Silva was following. Flagg wheeled and waved.

"Come on, Linc, get a move on; they've got a good picture at the Star."

Once in the thronged darkness of the picture-house, however, it was Silva who settled down to enjoy the film, Flagg whose thoughts went scattering.

Flagg had been on the loose for three years and a half, and he had seen the sights and learned the ways of some pretty hard places. Still, with sixteen years of another life behind him, he could never be thoroughly at his ease with people who pressed and smelled. Four hundred shoes wet with the slush and beginning to steam in the warmth now, two hundred weekly baths yet to be taken, a weight of breath perfumed with cinnamon, pepsin, and all the family of the mints. *Agh!*

But then, against revulsion, the revolt. As always. By one trick or another, Saturday could always work it.

This Saturday, with the holidays in eye, the picture was a Christmas melodrama. There was a Christmas morning in a happy house, early, before the young ones were up. There was a tree, lighted and waiting in what for all of Hollywood's efforts might have been a fine, long-lived-in room. At least there was a feeling about it of space and of peace.

Flagg wished. Nostalgia, a hungry, black, shapeless old thing, finished the week as ever by dragging him down. Down, down, and down. To save him he had to shake himself. He had to do battle now. He had to mouth oaths, swagger, sneer.

"There's a ribbon-clerk's life for you! Slap me on the wrist!"

Squirming in his seat, he dilated savage nostrils and sniffed in greedily the effluvium of lungs and pores. Deliberately renegade, he framed his thoughts in the slovenly words of the yards, the foundries, and car-barns.

"Gi'me this kind of an outfit any time. Them for me. We got hair on our chests.

Got no time for drinking pink tea and reciting poetry, not this gang. We know what we want and we go after it. If we like a guy, that's that, he can trail with us; if we don't we can knock his God-damn block off. We got hands, and God help the lads and lassies when we double 'em up into fists. Stink, do we? Take a smell of it!"

His defiant bitterness touched bottom when he thought of his father and mother and brother. He had to make himself laugh, make himself sneer.

"Oh, no, father mustn't go down cellar, or father'll get boiled. Listen to mother now!

"No, and Flaggie mustn't go down cellar either. Oh, horrors! Flaggie's had a whole sip of red ink and Flaggie dear is as boiled as an owl. . . . Now don't you dare touch your brother, you bad boy. Rex is a good little boy. Rex is mother's angel. Don't you dare!"

It was a pain to think of his father.

"Father loves you, Flagg, old man."

"The hell you do! The hell of a lot of

difference it makes to you or anyone else what I do, where I go, or how I make out."

After the show, emerging with the supper-bound crowd, Silva said, "Where do we eat? Home?"

Flagg scowled at the lobby-lights, his face looking bruised and congested.

"Home, my ——!"

"Child's, then?"

"Child's, my ——!" Flagg flung away. "You eat where you want to; I'm going to see what the gang's got on down to the wagon."

In the "dog-wagon," down near the Nantucket boat dock, the air was thick with steam. The hottest spot of all was where Flagg sat, next to the coffee-machine, at an end of the long counter. It was as hot as hell, and it was Flagg's own hell. Into it at last the curve of the graph of his week descended.

He had a Hamburger roast, fried onions, raisin pie, and coffee, but he only messed with them. His throat kept contracting and contracting. All down the line the feeders,

freight-hands, shipyard hands, Brava fishermen, chomped their teeth and breathed into their victuals. Linc Silva had something in a coffee cup. The whole ritual of its producing, from Silva's wink and nod, through "Wagon Mike's" sleight-of-hand in the pigeonhole between the sugar and flour under the counter, up to the slide of the cup across the imitation mahogany, Flagg watched with a tightening fascination. When Silva had emptied the cup at a gulp, winced, and wiped his mouth, he put it down near Flagg's elbow. Flagg pushed it back roughly in among the other's dishes.

"Rot holes in your own guts if you want to. But keep it out from under *my* snoot, please."

"Be yourself, be yourself! That ain't no hooch, that's bond stuff. Mike got it off a coastguard. Say, what's crawled up you?"

Flagg licked his lips and continued to stare across Silva's shoulders at the empty cup. He spoke with a running, disordered vehemence.

"Bond stuff or not, what good's it to you? Where's it get you to? . . . No, keep your simp look to yourself, I'm no Sunday-school boy. It's just I've seen too much of it. I can remember the time when my father—why, my father was a prince of a man. But then the booze. I was no more'n a kid; I never got wise to what was going on till I saw how nervous it got my mother, scared of it all the time, worrying herself. Then the fights. Oh, no, you don't need to tell *me* about booze, Linc. When you hear your own mother bawling your own father out for a drunken bum—"

Flagg shut his mouth tight. He shut his eyes tight. Wave on wave, the black tide he knew so well came rushing. Homesickness. Want. The sense of his immaturity, and so his inferiority to these men about him who either knew how to handle themselves or else knew enough not to give a damn.

Panic. Booze! Booze! Booze! Everywhere he turned, monstrous to grab at him. Booze! Booze!

Nothing left but mutiny. If you want to be strong you must hate.

"They made a fine mess of everything, they did. To hell with 'em! They thought they knew so much. Mother, trying to tell me I was drunk on one swallow of red ink. I could show her a few."

Disdain. Headlong. Pitiless.

"They set 'emselves up to tell me what to do with my life; look what they have done with their own. To hell with all that tripe!"

He kept trying not to think of his father. But there was his father.

"Well, why didn't he beat her up, then? No hair on his chest, that's why."

Revenge.

"I'll show 'em. To hell with what they think of me! What do I care?"

"Mike! Hey, Mike, one 'Ceylon tea'."

He hated the taste of this stuff that Mike peddled. First it burned, then it sickened him. "Bond stuff in a pig's eye!" What did anyone

want to put that cheap, tricked-up imitation of real liquor into his stomach for?

"Sss! Mikey. Gi'me another to take the taste of that one out."

There came a point when Flagg confided to Silva, "I'm a heller when I get a bend on. Keep this in your trap. Once when I had a snoot-full I killed a guy." Horror whipped him on. "My brother. My own kid brother."

It was curious. He had long been aware, of course, that Rex had been no worse than knocked out that night. But at a certain stage of intoxication he forgot this, and the nightmare of the fleeing murderer, coming up out of the cellar of his mind, was the truth again. This was what made him so hard for his friends to handle. If he was a killer, he would be a killer. "What'd that guy say to me? Doesn't know who I am, does he? Christ-a-mighty, get outa my way, le'me break his little white neck for him."

Flagg could forget at last what it was he was unhappy about, but never once till he

passed out completely could he forget that he was unhappy.

A girl in a place, somewhere between Saturday's supper and two o'clock Monday morning, said to him, "India. That your name? That's a card of a name, that is. But I heard it once before, though. A jane that lived in the boarding-house I did in Roxbury, Mass., when I was working. Say, there was a hard one for you to figure. Had a card of a first name, too. Fern. Worked in some store in Boston. Any relative of yours?"

Pain. Confused, shapeless, unplaceable.

"I can't remember. Girl? No, hell, I've got no girl relatives."

His eyes began to fill with tears, red tears because his eyes were red.

"You mean—you don't mean Fern India? Not *Fern!*"

When pain got too bad, when Flagg was drunk, it made him ugly. It made him hit at anything, anything.

"Oh, her. She wasn't my sister. She was

a girl they had at the house a while. They had to kick her out. I don't know why. What's the diff? I don't care, she's no relative of mine. Who asked you to mix in, anyhow?"

It was a day in August, hot as only downtown Boston can be hot. In the King's Court Book Shop the second saleslady alone carried on unwilted, even though by being able to do so she let herself in for continual shifts of work from other's shoulders. "Oh, Miss India, a gentleman for the *Story of Mankind*." . . . "Road maps, Miss India." . . . "Miss India" this, "Miss India" that.

It was like Fern India to go on "as hard as nails" till she was ready to drop. It was a matter not so much of pride as of an habitual self-defense that none of the other salespeople should guess that ten times more than theirs her nerves, tightening day by day under a weight more oppressive than any summer's heat, were ready to go twanging to pieces now.

She dared not bite her lip; without even the

help of that she must carry on at the dead level of an impersonal graciousness. "Yes, I have read it; yes, madam, it ends very happily indeed."

Mr. Sycles came through the sticky air from the office, bringing her a letter. She knew from whom it must be, since but one person ever addressed her in care of the shop. And she thought, as one thinks of a last straw: "This too!" Her employer, pausing in his retreat to study her for a moment, thought to *him*self: "By gracious, I wonder if it's ever occurred to anyone that Miss India might be good-looking —darned good-looking—if it weren't for—for —if it weren't for—what?"

There it was. If it weren't for what? Never mind, she was an ideal employee. No feuds, no intrigues. No one in the place had ever got close enough to Miss India either to like or to dislike her.

Fern opened the envelope, which contained a correspondence card.

"May your birthday be bright, Fern, and

your twenty-second year your happiest. With my love. Sam Henry India." On the reverse was written in the same minute but flowing hand: "From all I can hear, Flagg is somewhere around Boston. If you should see him, give him my love, would you? He is lots younger than you, Fern. He takes his windmills hard."

All through her, inside of her, Fern heard the song of the wires of her nerves heightening. "This too!" she repeated. Crumpling the card she threw it into a basket.

"Sir? . . . We haven't a copy at present, but we should be glad to get it for you, sir. . . . Beg pardon? . . . It is published by Alden & India, I believe."

And she was too hard-set to smile even at the irony of that.

She was the first out at five. Out and lost in the crowd. With the deep red of her cropped hair hidden under a severely blocked, too tightly fitting *cloche*, her straight skirt inches longer than the season's wear, her feet more-than-sensibly shod, and her eyes strictly

on their road, it was hardly likely that anyone would choose Fern India to look at twice.

Still, there were men in the world—

But she was so preoccupied for once with the coming around again of the hour of bickering, so novel, so dreadful, that she had almost forgotten, until, at a stand near the Park Street subway station, she saw a picture of a girl all-but-naked on a magazine cover, and a young truckman, his shirt sweated through between the shoulder-blades, his feet spread and hands on his hips, standing there studying it frankly.

Fern had to hurry on to keep from being tempted to slap the fellow. It was stifling underground. In the car all the young girls lolled for air, showing the legs through their stockings half way up their thighs. All the men—Fern had no need to spy on them to know it—were leering.

Clysta Spencer, her library-bag on her arm, boarded the car at Dartmouth. Fern gave up her seat and worked her way out to the plat-

form, which was as far as Clysta had been able to get.

"You came in early this morning. You were gone before breakfast. Why?"

"I had stacks of filing to get done." Clysta handled her bag.

Fern loathed herself. But she couldn't help it. "He brought you home in a taxi last night."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Did he try any—did you have any trouble?"

"What *are* you— I don't understand what you mean."

These evasions. These avertings of the eyes.

It seemed to Fern she would rather have torn her tongue out of her mouth than to have it shape another word. She, who had stripped life down deliberately to the quick of pride, had she no pride?

"Did he try to fondle you, Clysta? Did he —kiss you? . . . There! He did, he did.

. . . Didn't he? Why don't you answer me, then?"

The swift exhaustion of self-loathing. Fern had to stop and rest a moment before she went on. The nearest thing to her eyes was an ear of Clysta's, just the lobe, peeping from beneath the hair. How translucent that leaf of flesh was, unpigmented, bloodless. And yet it seemed to Fern's close eye that it bore on itself a film of light come from within, an eager, tentative opalescent eradiation. Or perhaps it was all a trick of day-shine broken among innumerable tiny beads of sweat.

Now Fern felt something more frightening than anything else, a hidden tremor of revulsion. Hide it deeper. Kill it. Bury it!

"A week ago, Clysta, you wouldn't have—You despised him. You told me so, you know you did."

A fling and a frown. "Don't be so dumb, Fern. Must I explain again that the only way I could hear that concert was by going with Mr. Rathburn?"

"Oh—*yes*."

An oppressive wordlessness, all through the boarding-house dinner. Worse than oppressive, eerie. Afterwards, capitulation. The final plunge into the bottom depths of shame.

"Is he coming this evening, Clysta?"

"Who?"

"Let's go somewhere, then. Anywhere. For a ride or a walk or—"

"Surely. . . . But I don't know, though. I don't feel awfully—"

"Head ache?"

"A little."

Fierce penitence. "Oh, you poor dear! This hot day! I'm a pig!"

The slow summer dusk. Darkness coming up the long straight street. And with the darkness, from four houses down, the slightly fattish form of Rathburn, the "Tech" tutor. Drifting. By and by two forms, drifting away into the darkness up the long straight street.

Up in her hot room Fern undressed and lay

down on the bed. Hours passed, or what seemed hours.

The heavy air of the night was like the water of a Dead Sea; it would let nothing sink. The whine of trolleys away on Blue Hill Avenue, the voices of people blocks distant, it brought floating. It was as though your dentist, gone mad, were buzzing his buzzer right through into the core of your brain. Fern couldn't lie there suffocating herself. Up she got. It seemed to her that she could have killed Clysta.

Around and around the black room she walked, knocking against things. Pushing them away from her she found that her hands were cold, in the hot night. Not chairs, not furniture, these things she pushed away, but creatures. Perhaps it was jealousy that had given her the faculty; in her arid innocence it was the first time she had ever been aware that there were creatures around her, spawn of shadows, ringing her in.

And now she had to do more than push them

away; she had to press through, break out, escape. Dragging some clothes on she opened her door, descended the stairs, went into the street.

She walked without aim and at a rapid pace, not for long in any one line. Two figures strolled there. Halt. Retreat. Against the ring of a street-light at a corner, two other silhouettes. Turn! It might be they.

She crossed a wide avenue, climbed a little rise of turf, got through a pipe fence and struck out into the rolling savanna of a park. It must have been very late, for here where at another hour there would have been many shadowy, summery couples to avoid she advanced in apparent solitude. Mounting steadily, keeping to the turf where her feet made no sound, presently she was in cover, shrubs and trees.

The night was moonless, lighted only in the gaps among the tree-tops by a few fat and feeble stars. Fern came to a stand. She hadn't to be quiet for more than ten seconds before a multitude of things began to stir all about her

in this bit of wilderness, mites that crept, lives no greater than dust-particles, flitting, twittering. Up from the grass came the strong, cool scent of roots and dew.

Fern thought, "Clysta!" But of a sudden it was no more than a puzzled interrogation. "Clysta?" It was as if a thick, hot, heavy cloak had fallen from her shoulders. "What of Clysta? If she wants a man, why shouldn't she? Lots do."

So without apparent reason something that had been snarled was untangled. In a wink a water that had been muddy ran clear.

Like a wild earth-creature, Fern India had gone to earth. Men and women, boys and girls? Humans? She wanted no tie or likeness with that race. Of all things she would be, she would be a tree. A smooth-skinned, white, slender sapling in the hush of a wilderness, holding the earth to her with the deep, blind, quenchless embrace of her roots, draining out of it and into herself the sweet-bitter water of its life.

Fern took off her dress, pulling it all in one quick motion over her head. She kicked her shoes off. She had a strange and a strong desire to lie bare against the dewy earth. Prone and close.

She untied the ribbon of her plain white step-in. As she did so a thought out of nowhere came winging. A writing on a card.

"From all I can hear, Flagg is somewhere—"

Flagg.

Why had she had to think of Flagg?

With fingers gone wooden she retied the ribbon, drawing it tight. She stooped to catch up her dress, lying pale, like a wilted chaplet, on the black grass. Half way of the gesture, though, she sank to her knees and covered her face with her hands. For a moment nothing was to be heard but the chattering of her teeth. Then she began to cry.

She cried, cried, cried.

Feet were falling. Legs thrashed through brush. The man they belonged to advanced to

within a few paces and half stooped to peer. It was one of the park police. Perceiving a girl in dishabille and sobbing, he arrived at the park policeman's inevitable conclusion.

"Hunh! Not so good, eh? Well, you were askin' for it, weren't you? Where's he gone to?"

Fern couldn't move a muscle. "Oh! Oh!"

The man started to hunt around in circles, widening his cast, striking the branches of the undergrowth aside. "As for you, Daisy, you get dressed and get out of here."

"Oh!"

"Which way'd he go—your boy friend? Listen, talk!"

When Fern could stir she stirred with the speed of scared lightning. Her dress streaming and bellying from her fingers she ran.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Dim as a ghost, flying.

The park man followed a little way, then gave it up.

"Oh!"

. . . . . .

One day one of India's partners, Maynard Wills, who had been out over the week-end, said something that brought India up standing.

"About that boy of yours, Sam. What's his line to be? Thought yet?"

"That boy of mine?" It was absurd, but there was an instant when India's mind went everywhere. Then his eyes fell, and a slight flush ran to his temples. "Oh, Rex?" The flush deepened. It was awkward. Wills ought to have known better. "Well, in a case like Rex's it's a little hard to say."

"If he's to carry on in the firm, I was just thinking, it seems to me there are jobs we could put him at right now. There's nothing like learning the ropes early. We lost something in the world when we lost the apprentice."

"But—Rex, now—but somehow I had never thought of Rex as—"

"As in the book-business? Lord, I should say he was cut for it. I was talking yesterday with his mother. Why don't you bring him down?"

Of all things! Of all things! For a while India went around rubbing his eyes. Had he been fighting a blind man's fight, these years, holding a fool's ground? There was Rex. There was Anne.

When India looked at himself now, in the beginning of his fifties, it gave him a queer turn to see how old he had grown. Would he had been younger, stronger and straighter if he had seen the kind of truth that Anne saw? There *is* nothing after all that succeeds like success. He who rides on the band-wagon rides high.

He saw, as if it were all of a sudden, that Rex was nearly as tall as he. Not only that; he saw Rex, the weakling, standing on stronger legs than his own, better armed in self-assurance, the dark and utter stranger, going his own way now, silent with the silence of them that can afford to hold their peace. The day it came to India that that look in Rex's eyes, which had always been to him an enigma, was a look no longer of self-defense, but of a kind of pity-

ing disapproval mixed with an iron, Puritanical disdain, was the day when the light was nearer than it had even been to going out.

Who knows but what it might have gone out presently, had it not been for the saving lift of an anticlimax? When one is being put to the ground by the odds of weight in a private tussle, there's something comic, and by that reinvigorating, in the sight of all the neighbors running in to jump on top of the pile.

Riding out in the train one late afternoon in May, two of India's townsmen came to sit in the double seat with him. When they had exchanged a few words with him, India found himself, mystified, beginning to doubt that they had fallen into his company altogether by accident. There began to emerge a certain purposefulness.

One was a clergyman, pastor of an old church which had once stood in the open valley, but was now grown about by the mills. The other was his solidest parishioner, the prohibition enforcement officer of the district. The latter did

most of the talking, reddening from time to time, occasionally hesitating, making the best of a subject which must be difficult for them all. The Reverend Mr. Cornhouse contented himself for the most part with sitting tight and holding India with his eyes, in which there glimmered green lights like little beads.

It came around to this: "Your land runs up the ridge a good way beyond White Brook, doesn't it, Mr. India? . . . Yes. . . . Did you know that we had been on your land lately?"

"You have been on my land?"

"Were you aware that part of your land has been in use lately, by some of the youngsters from Mill Town, India? As a place of—of—"

"Debauch," Mr. Cornhouse supplied.

India looked from one to the other. "I was not so aware."

"I'm telling you. . . . Well, India, to get down to brass tacks, am I right in my under-

standing that you've got a stock of it at your house?"

"Stock?"

"Of wines and liquors? A cellar, I mean. No, no, there's no call for your—you can be perfectly frank about it—I'm told it's all O.K.—stuff you put down a long while before the law came on. So now?"

"Such being the case, may I inquire what all this is supposed to be driving at?"

"Now, Mr. India, I hope you won't—A man of your standing, of course the farthest thing from our thoughts would be that you personally were in any way responsible for it. But. If you'll just co-operate with us. By telling us if there's any way you know of, of there being a leakage from your stock. . . . No, no, now, Mr. India. But there's always servants. Yes, I know, but they're so hell-bent for the stuff now-days they'd get around the honestest of them; they'll do anything, these kids, pay anything, damn 'em—excuse me, Mr. Cornhouse. But we've been pretty successful lately in dry-

ing this section up, and that's how I happen to know this booze couldn't have come through any of the bootleggers."

"Moreover," the clergyman put in, thinning his lips, "the bottles we've found up there are not bootleggers' bottles; they're all old pre-war."

"So, Mr. India—servants? Or—well—you've a son, I'm told."

It was Cornhouse that protested. "Leave the son out of it, Osborn. I know Rex. If there's anyone that's with us on that, it's Rex India. He's been in our men's class for the past two years."

("So that," thought India, "is where he's been all these Sundays.")

"I was just trying to—well—narrow it down. So—servants?"

India took his time. He didn't want to snort in their faces; that would have been too good of him. He took his key-ring from his pocket and laid one of the keys along his finger.

"Gentlemen. From the outside of my house there is no conceivable way of entering my wine-cellar. From the inside there is only one, and that is through an oak door two inches thick. You will examine this key. You will observe that it is of a most intricate type. For some years past it has been the only key left in the world that would unlock that door. It has been continuously in my possession. . . . And now, since it makes many people giddy to ride backwards in a train, and since by turning that seat of yours over you might as easily be facing the engine, I—I should think you would do it."

Yes, it was a lift. For the first time in months he felt he could laugh, and by laughing, get his neck straight and his arm free. Anne and Rex, with Osborn, Cornhouse, Tom, Dick and Harry behind them, were of a sudden not as prodigious as Anne and Rex alone.

"By the Eternal," he could say once more, "I *am* right."

That evening when he got home he could do

something he hadn't dared trust himself to do for some time, he could clap Rex roundly between the shoulder-blades. "Well, sonny, how's everything? Fine?"

Anne studied him, touched by curiosity. "What's the news?"

"It seems I'm a low character." India chuckled. "I'm being watched by the police. I'm thrilled, my dear."

Later in the evening, when he had been out on the porch alone for a time, staring into the afterglow of sunset across the populous valley, he came in to say: "When I take my September holiday this year, Anne, I'm thinking of spending it in Boston."

"A holiday—in *Boston!* For heaven's sake, why?"

"Both the twins are there."

IV.

Fern had the evening before her, and nothing to do and nowhere to go. In the ten months that had passed since she had lost Clysta Spencer to Rathburn, the Technology tutor, she had found it increasingly hard to know what to do with the hours when she was not at work. The break-up of that passionate confederacy of man-hate and man-fright, the peculiar perilousness of which she had never been able to glimpse until the hour of jealousy, had left her more profoundly shaken than she would have guessed it could.

The worst of it was that whereas she had long been strange in the sight of ordinary everyday people, she now began to grow strange in her own. She had a good brain, and she knew it. So it hurt her pride and undermined her intellectual self-faith to find herself, more and more often, and seemingly willy-nilly, doing the commonest things, frequenting the sil-

liest sort of shipping-clerk and shop-girl places, as it were incognito to her own self.

Perhaps it was simply a matter of anything rather than inaction and solitude and the facing of thought. Or, perhaps, it was something else.

Tonight, mainly because street-cars are moving things, she went out and took the first street-car she could find. At the end of its run she transferred to another, going always with the traffic, caught without a struggle in the summer evening's tide. It dumped her out at Revere Beach, among the glare-lights and giant whirlgigs.

Fern was not rich, and the pleasure she took was an inexpensive one. Wherever a crowd was, there she could indulge herself. A crowd such as this, young, irresponsible, and adventure-bent, was ideal for her purposes.

All she did was walk, minding her own business. She was dressing differently these days and altogether more becomingly, wearing a higher heel, a shorter skirt, and a sheerer

stocking, and letting a feather of her deep burnt hair show against the startling whiteness of her temple. Feeling physically at an ebb, she had taken to touching her mouth with carmine.

Now, more and more often, the thing she loathed happened; men looked at her. Having looked once, many looked twice, and some even turned to follow, to "give her the eye," and, at the worst, to accost her. As a matter of fact, that was not the worst. On two or three occasions in a crowd she had suffered soft pinches, above the elbow or on the hip.

She had not had any of these offenders taken up, actually, contenting herself with a full, cold, impersonal stare. Only in her imagination did she let her fury run; vividly, in fancy, she saw herself calling a policeman, sharing the rough-and-tumble of capture, enduring the stares of the gathering mob, waiting for the patrol-truck to come racketing to carry the wretch away, its gong ringing down through all her arteries with her pulse, an electric

clangor, a wild beatitude of revenge. All in her own mind as it was, after an orgy of this sort she felt ashamed. Puzzled, despising herself, depressed by the inevitable hang-over from an emotional excess, she was glad if it was a Saturday night, giving her a long Sunday to lie, half sick, in bed. . . .

June night, full of stars, but no stars visible. On the ocean's edge, but no ocean to be seen. Nothing but blue-white suns and sprawling moons, incandescent crags, bright stucco gates leading to tawdry enchantments, things oscillating, things whirling, all ablaze. Music, music, everywhere. So many kinds of it, from so many directions, that it ceased to be music and became a mere wash of sound, under-run by the wash of the rivers of thousands and thousands of feet, thousands of breathings, gigglings, squeaks, and hails.

An eye.

Another eye, arrested, brightening, narrowing with a wink.

Another. Eye of a Southron, darkly melting.

Eye of a young Mick, blue, daring.

"All 'lone, sweetie? So'm I. Ain't that sad? Care if I—"

First of all she had to conquer the faintness that ran up her legs, wave on wave, but when she had done that it seemed to Fern her strength was more than human; it was tigerine. Chin rigid, lips curled at the corners, gaze leveled, lids narrowed, pupils enlarged, she would begin now to give it to him.

"I am alone, yes. Of what possible interest can that be to you?"

There was more than a satisfaction, there was a curiously voluptuous pleasure in seeing him try to take hold of that with his simple mind. Blinking. Not quite knowing whether it was a lead or not. Gaping, like a fish out of water. There was a rapture like no other rapture of the senses in watching him (the more slowly, the sweeter) shrivel up. Then, the *coup de grâce:*

"*You?* Agh! Go on about your business, quickly, before I call an officer."

After that, walking on, she would become aware of the attack of that faintness once more, but now it was not as of fright, but as of an accomplished transport. For fifty or a hundred yards she had to go with downcast eyes. . . .

Late in the evening there was a fellow who passed her several times, always at a distance, first in a gang of four, then by himself. It seemed to take him forever to get his nerve up. When he was plainly about to accost her at last, seeing he was a lusty, careless, finely muscled young bruiser, contentment whipped Fern's heart. "The bigger they are," as the prizefighters say, "the harder they fall." But then she saw it was Flagg India.

They stood in the middle of the human torrent, eddied about, elbowed, and shouldered, and widened their eyes.

"It *is* you, Fern. I knew—I thought—I knew it was you."

"Why, Flagg! Why—Flagg!"

Presently he was going to wonder how he had known she was Fern; she was going to wonder how, in those features, thickened by all the kinds of blows life had rained upon them, she had recognized Flagg's features, or how she had seen Flagg's clear eyes in these that were so unclear, so absurdly hagridden, so pathetically fearful of being anything but roustabout and bellicose. But as yet, as though the pupils that were so big were therefore blind, neither perceived that the other was strange. Years were wiped out. They awoke for a moment out of tangled dreams, and for the moment did not seem to know that they were going back into them again.

"What are you doing here, Flagg?"

"Just bumming. Drifting around with the gang."

"I mean—here in Boston."

"Oh, nothing. Working. I've got a job over in South Boston—it's the Hendrix Leather Company—in their shipping sheds."

"Where are you living, Flagg?"

He gave her the address of his boarding-house. And then: "But what are *you* doing here, Fern? How did *you* ever happen up around this way? How long have you been here? Where do *you* live?"

She told him. That was the astonishing thing. Struck, not dumb, but garrulous, they forgot themselves. Perhaps it was rather that for a wink they remembered themselves and were making all haste to give themselves away beyond recall before the sorcery should pass and they be whisked apart again.

There they stood for a while, like two come from the ends of the earth to meet wading in a ford, and then though the tide of bodies that bore against them and the froth of innumerable fragmentary voices that washed over them meant less than nothing, Flagg protested, "Come on, let's get out of this," and making a way with his shoulder led her down to the quieter sand.

They sat there on the soft, long-shadowed

stuff, still unguarded and almost feverishly voluble, each catching the word from the other before the other was done.

"Now that I've found you, Flagg—"

"Now that I know you're here, Fern, and know where you live—"

At first it had been only his eyes, but now the boy's whole face seemed changing, like a contused flesh blown upon by a healing wind.

Fern sat and never stirred, all the knots of her nerves undone. For the while she felt the heaven of one who has been kept awake beyond endurance by the blows of a "third degree," let sleep and caught into immediate dream. The scene was set for nothing else, indeed, a formless ground, an uncharted reef, claimed neither by life nor death, light nor darkness, sound nor silence. Blaring brightness on one side, black space on the other, there still lay this no-man's-land between.

"Flagg—"

"Fern, now listen—"

"We can do—" There were so many things they could do.

"We can go—" There was a whole city, a whole world.

"But, Flagg, you've got to take some care of yourself. You look as if you hadn't been."

"How can a fellow? Batting around with the gang I do. What's there in it, anyway, when there's nobody that gives a damn? You do, though, now."

"Oh, Fla-a-gg!"

"You *do!*"

Suddenly, making a great, sliding hole in the sand with his hip, the boy was down with his head in her lap. Not a sound. Simply a letting-go. A complete, awkward, heavily-imprisoning sprawl.

Something took hold of Fern's throat and squeezed. It was almost as if Flagg had reached up to do it.

Fern tried. "Don't be a fool!" she implored of herself. Aloud, but weakly, clearing her constricted throat, she maundered over him:

"Yes, Flagg, yes. There, there!" By an act of will that made her break out in perspiration she lifted her free hand to lay it upon the thick, disordered hair, and then, because it shook so that she was afraid he could feel it all the way down her limbs, could not.

"Oh, Flagg!" But it might have meant anything.

Still she tried. She looked down over her chin, her eyes dilating. All she could see, now, was the cords at the back of this man's neck rounding into the processes of the vertebræ, swollen with growth, covered with short bristles and pitted with pores. She felt the weight of his shoulders as an animal aggression pinning her to the ground and the heat of his contact as a violence striking through her clothing and spotting the hidden whiteness of her knees and thighs.

But it was only Flagg, only Flagg, she kept on protesting.

She bit her mouth. Only Flagg. And she saw in a flash that that was just the trouble.

It was not that Flagg was a man, with the others, but that all those other men against whose proximity her body had rebelled these years had been Flagg India, and none but Flagg. She saw him on the bank of that brook, red-faced and white-naked, and suddenly staring. Her mouth fell open and she began to breathe heavily.

Flagg lifted himself on his arms to study her. In that second she was on her feet, yards away.

"Why, what's the— Fern!"

"I'm sorry, Flagg. I—I don't—can't bear being—"

"Being what?"

"Being—what you were doing."

"What was I doing?"

Flagg was too bewildered to move. He remained there, reared on his arms like a stuffed walrus, his neck cracked back.

"Say! What was I doing?"

"I can't help it. I hate being touched."

Now the magic was gone, and with it Fern,

the "twin" he remembered. The time was come for him to wonder how in the devil he had imagined he had recognized as anyone he had ever known this strange, tall, narrowly-contained, chance-met young woman, who stood there above him in the streaked half-light of a Boston pleasure-beach, mysteriously troubled. Yes, and mysteriously troubling. Now that his eyes were cleared and he saw that she was not Fern, he saw that she was, in her own queer pestilential way, with that stark coloring of hers that was like blood on snow in moonlight, beautiful for a man to look at.

Fury and shame darkened his face, shame at having acted so with a stranger, fury at the fashion of her rebuke. He scrambled to his feet and stood, not knowing what to do with his hands.

"*Touching* you!" He scowled, he was so hurt. "For God's sake, if you feel that way—"

"It's my fault, Flagg." Could he but have heard the sob behind it.

"If you think for one second anything off-color ever entered *my* head—"

"Flagg, Flagg, haven't I told you I was sorry?"

"Sorry! In a pig's eye, you are!" He spoke out of a black gap in one corner of his mouth. He laughed and spit. "You're sorry like the rest of 'em. You give just about that much of a damn."

He wheeled and started off. He hesitated, muttering: "*Touched* her! What do you know about that?" giving her one last chance. When she failed to take it he opened his mouth to the sky. "*Good*—NIGHT!"

After he had gone, Fern sank down on the sand. She put her face in her two hands. It was only after she had rocked and twisted for nearly a minute that she could cry.

When it was too late she hurried up into the thinning crowd on the board walk, trying to find him. More men than ever looked at her, with that mark of wildness on her, but none of them was Flagg.

Next morning, before eight, she stood in the alley opposite the gate of the shipping-shed where he had said he worked. Here were men, with a vengeance; the street outside her hiding-place ran hordes of them, human bucks and bulls, big-necked, smelling of machinery and tobacco and sweat. But eight o'clock on a dozen whistles blew them away through gates and doors and no Flagg yet had she seen.

He came along the street alone, a quarter-hour late, kicking the pavement woodenly with his soles.

"Didn't I tell you I was sorry, Flagg? I do care, so much, so much. And now that you're here, and I'm here, and we've found each other again—"

But not a word of it aloud. Not so much as an inch, she found too late a second time, had she budged from her ambush in the alley. Flagg, still punishing the ground, disappeared in the yard across the street. The gate closed with a bang.

. . . . .

It was on a Saturday evening in early September, just a week before India's holiday was to begin, that Anne broached at last the subject the contemplation of which he had been dreading, if only half consciously, for nearly a quarter of a year. It was about Rex. Rex, and his need of doing something. She had thought it over; she had talked it all over with others. His father's own office seemed to everyone altogether the best place for him to begin. After the holiday, then?

When he had looked at the floor for a while, India nodded.

"Very well." There was a sigh behind it. "I suppose you know, though, the responsibility you're asking me to assume."

"Why shouldn't you? Besides, Maynard Wills is all for it. You needn't worry about Rex; he'll do his work. I've a feeling he'll surprise you, Sam."

"It's not about the work. It's about—Bluntly, Anne, you know as well as I that there are a lot of things we've shielded him from.

That stops when he goes to the city. You can lock up the bottles in our cellar, but you can't lock up the desks of every man down there with whom he'll come in contact. To say nothing of—well, still bluntly, Anne—stenographers."

Anne's eyes narrowed; the hint of an unwonted flush dyed her cheeks.

"The shame of it is, Sam, that you don't know anything about your own son. Worse than you don't, you *won't.* Rex has gone through his mill here before your very eyes. You've chosen to shut them. His fight was won the day he realized it was a harder fight than anyone's else, the day he accepted the fact that he had to be better, stronger, and carefuler than others have to be. It's taken nearly twenty years, but now you've a son that's a grown man. Take him, look at him, and thank God, Sam India. And do your worrying about those other fathers' sons, sneaking their illicit whisky out of their dirty speakeasies into their desks down there. Rex can

take care of himself. Perhaps there'll come a day when he can take care of—some one else."

The clear, devoted, pitiless passion of it attacked his doubt.

"I didn't know it could be done," he said.

"What?"

He started upstairs, returned halfway, hesitated, repeated to himself, "I didn't know it could be done," then turned to climb again. On his way to his room he faltered for an instant in face of his son's door.

India wanted to know the truth, even if it hurt him. That was his weakness.

"I wonder. Is it true I've deliberately chosen to close my eyes? For it *is* true I don't know a single thing on earth about that boy in there."

It followed him, even to bed, the symbolism of that closed door with the silent boy shut in behind it. He could not sleep. In the windless night, which grew more and more oppressive, he heard from passing cars the voices, the hails and laughter, of young people. These made

him think of Flagg and Fern and for a moment re-evoked that bitterness. But then his mind slid away again.

"I *have* been honest. That doesn't mean necessarily that I've been right. If I've been wrong I suppose as a decent father I ought to be very glad."

He got up finally and roamed. He went into the hall and stood in the dark again before that door. Anne was right; he had never put out a hand to open it. He had never once looked in to see who it was that was there.

No one was there.

When he had turned the knob softly and thrust his head into the room, that fact at first seemed only metaphorical, a dramatic answer to his questioning, startling, complete. Like the slang phrase— "Nobody home."

There was enough moonlight at the windows to show him that the bed had not been slept in. He entered, though, to make sure. Only after a minute or so did the fact of Rex's material

absence strike him as cause for mystification and alarm.

Returning to his own room he dressed, after a fashion, pulling his outer garments on over his pajamas. He thought for a wink he had been taken in, when, out in the hall once more, he saw a shadow stirring.

"Is that you, Rex?"

It was Anne's voice that came back, pitched queerly. "Where is Rex?"

"I don't know."

As India went down the stairs something deep at the back of his brain fell to ticking, the clock-work of an infernal engine he had been carrying around on him for months, without ever once guessing it.

Tick, tick, tick; it led him down one flight.

Tick, tick, tick, tick; down a second, and under the ground.

Reason had its moment. In face of the wine-room oak, thick as a wall itself and locked as it had been for years now with that unique key which India's fingers could feel among the

others on the ring in his trousers pocket, he shook his head savagely to clear it of that ticking.

"What in the name of all the silly devils!"

But then, in a flash which would have seemed altogether fortuitous, he saw himself in a railway coach. Before him he saw the faces of the inquisition, Mr. Fred Paula and the Reverend Mr. Cornhouse. He was holding out the ring, withering them with his dry and scornful attestation. ". . . the only key in the world that would unlock that door. . . ." ". . . Continuously in my possession."

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

Was it the only key? Memory skipped. There had been another. Anne had thrown it away, into the long grass, or the shrubberies, somewhere. Where had Rex been? Think. He had been standing out there, beside Flagg, confused, abashed and sullen, his gaze (when India looked) fixed in the valley below.

India bent to study the film of coal dust on

the cement floor. Now he saw in front of his own feet two footprints and half of a third. The missing fraction of that third one was hidden between the sill and the bottom of the oaken door. One of the whole ones pointed toward it; the other away.

He unlocked the door, swung it wide, switched on an interior light. No coal dust in here; an army of intruders would not have left a trace. The wine-racks? Gaps. Yes, but no telling. The spirits-racks?

Tick, tick, tick. And that was the end of the ticking. The infernal machine in India's brain went off.

"Steady!" he told himself, when he had relocked the door. "There's no use in your—" The flame of the interior explosion lit everything red. He still tried. "Remember, poor fellow, it's no fault of his."

Anne was at the head of the cellar stairs.

"Go on back to bed," he told her.

He went out by the kitchen door. When he

had crossed the yard and got up into the beginning of the woods he heard her following.

. . . . . .

The moon, still high in the west, was as broad across as seven moons. For moments it dimmed, then for moments glowed again. Glowing, it gave off long, sharp rays. Long, vacillating spines of green-white light. While these lasted, Rex's thoughts flew up and climbed about among them, nimble as so many monkeys through the treetops of heaven. But when the branches were reabsorbed into the failing moon, they came back to roost with him on his elm-stump in the sloping glade. Then he too rested through the slack of the night's pulse, his shoulders drooped, his eyes clouded, his feet hanging down heavy from his sylvan throne.

But even through these intervals of semi-torpor the continuity of delight was never broken. With thoughts as nimble as monkeys you can spy down through the roof of the leaves into the secret chambers beneath the leaves,

like a god. But if you're a god you've no need even of monkey thoughts; you've the all-penetrating, the all-comprehending ear.

The fall of a feather, the bruising of a leaf, the crackle of a grass-blade hidden away in the summer dark.

Breathings, heavy, light, rapid, drawn out long as a sleeper's sighs.

Laughter, thin as a little string, aimless as hysteria, befuddled.

Remonstrance, befuddled, too, but thick as a club: "F' Chri-sake, Amy, cut out the cacklin'. Want to get the whole town up here?"

The laughter loudening, despite itself. Runaway giggles. The sound of a buffet. A hush for a moment behind the hangings of the undergrowth. Then weeping and sobbing, sobbing and weeping.

Then sobbing and weeping from quite another quarter of the encircling grove: "Oh no! Oh no! Lis'en to that; Bert's beatin' up Amy. Where's he think—he gets—that stuff? Oh

no! Oh no! You're all like that—you fellahs are. No, you don't touch me—you le'me be. I wish I was dead."

So it went, inevitably, the pulse of a summer night like this. Health, youth, the golden trembling beatitude of whisky and love, the bright palaces of the dark. Then, between two winks, without warning, like a wind sweeping soundlessly through the wood, loathing and terror, dirt and pain. "I wish to God I was dead. I wish I was dead."

"Gi'me a drink, f' Chri-sake! Go ask the Prince of Wales out there; he's got another bottle yet, somewheres hid."

"He says he ain't."

"The hell he ain': Tell him I'm sick, I got to have it. Oh my God! I don't feel good. Who are you, anyways? What you done? Where are we at? How'd I ever come here?"

The moon, recuperated, was swelling again. Swiftly the streamers of its shine shot out, pale interweaving branches for apes to cavort in. Now Rex, though he moved neither hand

nor foot nor changed by a wrinkle the mask of his ascetic detachment and his pharisaical disdain, felt passing through all his flesh the shiver of a peculiar ecstasy, a slow, rhythmic knotting and release of the nerves. His flying thoughts jubilated.

"Let them suffer! Let them pay! The pigs, the sots, the sluts, they asked for it. It's nobody's fault but theirs."

He got his slate-colored eyes down from the moon-branches to study the fellow they called Cap' Johnnie, lying on his back in the long grass of the clearing, almost in the shadow of the stump. A tall, powerful man in his thirties, a machinist in the thread mills, handsome as an Adonis in a careless, adventurous, bruising way. He had gotten too much whisky too early; a half hour ago he had fallen there like a harvested tree, his mouth wide open and his eyes a little open at the moon. Occasionally he would choke, snore in gummy gasps, loudly, for a time, then lie as dead as wood again.

The rhythmic tensing and flexing of Rex's nerves heightened pace.

"Look at you," he apostrophized the sleeper. "Then look at me."

The sight of that great male beauty turned into a rubbish heap of flesh, of that muscled vitality stricken impotent at his feet, swept Rex with alternate waves of frost and flame. His heart pounded, distended with an exquisite pain.

"Look at you! It would have been so easy for you to be straight and strong. It would have been so easy for me to be crooked and wobbly. But now look at you there, and look at me here. Look, look, look!"

For an instant a fumbling paralysis tried to get hold of the boy's sinews, but he fought it off. He had a desire to get down and kick dirt and twigs over the recumbent giant, but he fought that off too. He sat immovable above the sins of the world. . . .

Two forms came out of the woods, a fellow and a girl. The fellow, leading, lifted his feet

high at each stride, as though stepping over logs. The girl was placing one foot in the way of the other, as though she were dancing the old "grapevine." Both had an air of mussed heaviness, their clothing awry.

The fellow stood in front of Rex's stump, his legs propped wide, his arms akimbo. "Come on, give us a drink; be a sport." He shot his chin out and drooped his lids. "Now listen, don't try that stuff, about there ain't any more."

Rex weighed him with only the briefest of glances. Then his eyes, passing on to the girl, ran slowly from head to feet of her dishevelment.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" The fellow stepped over another of his invisible logs, his hands working.

"You wait!"

Rex was too busy with the girl to be bothered. With his mask of contemptuous detachment still whole, but with an inner avidity, he marked detail by detail the stigmata of surfeit and corruption. The grass stems in the

frowse of yellow hair. The wrinkled garments. The ugly hang of lips that had overpassed their ripeness.

Voluptuary, Rex began now to tie up the ends of his night. Vicarious indulgence finds satiety, too. But how different from theirs was this fill of his. "I've not done anything I shouldn't. I've not touched anything, anything. Thank God, there's nothing I'll have to be sorry for in the morning."

He turned back to the fellow. "Nothing doing. You're all of you rotten stinking drunk, and you make me sick. Go home now, all of you, or at least get off this property. Gah! If you could see yourselves!"

The fellow was too nearly done for. It took his brain awhile to understand. With his dull eyes, his gaping mouth, his Saturday collar wilted and the made-up bow hanging from it by its rubber string, there he stood trying. Perhaps the meaning of the words never did get to his brain, but only as far as the muscles of his arms and shoulders. A snarl

came out of his mouth. Lifting both fists he started forward to murder.

There was only one thing Rex could do, and that was to sit unmoved and stare him between the eyes. Now, of a sudden, he was terrified. But even in terror he found a curious thrill. He foresaw the fist descending, forefelt the impact crushing his skull in on the left side, previsioned himself toppling, lying dead on the ground in the moonlight, on his dead lips the slight, voluptuously-disdainful smile of martyrdom.

The pain in his head was no bigger than a dime, but dazzling. It was only after some instants that he began to realize that, far from being murdered, he had not even been struck, not touched at all. He perceived his assailant lying supine across the legs of the other sleeper, Cap' Johnnie, his diaphragm fluttering with a kind of silly mirth as he passed out toward dreamland. And he beheld the girl, who had caught and tripped the beast in time, standing there alone before his tree-stump

throne, her eyes blazing-awake again, her shoulders, pale-naked where the brawl had torn her dress away, convulsed with her panting.

"Kid," she cried, "why don't you never?"

It startled Rex. His mouth fell open. Next instant, though, he closed it, drawing the lips thin around the teeth.

"Why don't I what?"

She advanced a step. The child of French-Italian people in the thread mills, she used her shoulders. "Why don't you like me? Ever since I first seen you, you good-lookin' boy, you, I wished— Why don't you never?"

"Do you mean with—*you?*" A sneer trembled on his mouth. "You? *Gah!*"

She came till her weight was against his knees. She spoke fiercely.

"I'm not so bad, and you know it, boy. I'm not dead yet."

Ecstasy laid hold of him. "You will be, though, dead of drink and disease within ten years."

She caught her breath. She turned a wild

gaze around her, at the black shadows among the tree-trunks, at the two men making the shape of a gibbet with their bodies on the ground. Tears came flooding out from between her lids and she began to sob. Of a sudden she swayed forward and caught Rex's neck in the double circle of her arms. Her strength was enormous. Nothing Rex could do was of any use against it. His shoulders in chancery, he found his head pinned, his face pressed heavily into the fullness of the flesh beneath her collar-bone. Woman flesh, smothering his eyes, flattening his nostrils, stopping his open mouth. Two measures beating against his face, like the counterplay of two dissonant drums in a humid darkness, the little drum of her heart, the big, slow drum of her sobbing.

When she let him go, as abruptly as she had caught him, and turned and walked away toward the trees, Rex slid from the stump and followed her. For the first time in memory his face looked naked.

He began to despair of catching her, his

knees wabbled so and his feet had grown so large. They tripped over the legs of the top one of the sleepers and threw him down. For a moment he lay there. He opened and shut his hands and ran his tongue around his lips.

The moon's corona covered a quarter of the sky, wavering flames. Rex got up. The girl, who had paused at the entrance to the shadow to look back at him, turned when she saw him afoot again, and went on in.

The pain was all gone from Rex's head. His feet were no longer too ponderous to lift. The trouble now was that they were too light. They were no longer on the ground, but inches above it. He could go through the motions of walking and running, but having no purchase on anything these motions got him nowhere. Still he kept working his hands and his newly limbered face, running his tongue all the while around the edges of his lips.

He heard his name called from the right, the downhill side of the glade. Twisting his head he saw his father and mother standing

there, just clear of the woods. He made a grimace at them, and then returned to his task of getting on. If he couldn't get on, in another minute, he was going to be deathly sick.

"Rex!" It was his mother again.

He turned away this time, suddenly and dizzily frightened. Finding his soles on earth again, he walked straight back to the stump and climbed up on it. His fright continued to grow, and with it that dizziness. He wanted to be sick, but a paralysis had taken hold of his stomach and gullet.

He was becoming very small. So was the moon. It had lost its crown of streamers and stood there as hard as a China marble.

They were coming to get him. His father. His mother.

The moon gave off a particle. Out of its whiteness a red corpuscle sprang. For the thousandth of a second, with the zigzag vacillation of lightning, it cast and recast about the sky. Then, spying Rex at last, unerringly, it spun down and hit him on the head.

It bent him over backwards. Immediately, then, the weight of his body counterbalanced the weight of his legs. So he went over the rear of the stump in a somersault and lay in a pile on the ground.

Rex India was dead.

. . . . . .

Sam India was fifty-four years old, yet he carried his son's body down as far as the stepping-stones in White Brook in one lift. Then it was only the weakness that came with the reawakening of his brain that made him put his burden down.

The hideous pity of this thing. Poor boy! For a moment he was all the fathers that have ever lost their sons. He stood panting with it, his head hanging, tears running down his face.

Anne stood on the other side of the body. So far she had not made a sound. Her eyes were dry. When she did speak at length her voice was harsh.

"See what you have done."

His tears were stopped. He squared his

shoulders and straightened his legs, pity gone. Twenty years rose up. For the first time in his life, Sam India saw red.

"What *you* have done, rather."

"*I!* Had I had my way, you know as well as I that this would never have happened. It was taking the whisky that began it. But Rex would never have carried whisky up there, simply because he would never have known what whisky was. He would never have known what it was because there would never have been any to know."

"Where?"

With a stiff arm, the straight sword of the angry angel, Anne swept the air before her.

"Anywhere! Ever! If women are to be asked to bear sons in pain—"

"And daughters," India cut in. "For if you had your way, Anne, there would be no daughters, no girls. Girls are another of the devil's—"

"They, too!" There was no instant of hesi-

tation; the sword swept the air again. "No girls. I could kill them all, so gladly."

"And no beauty. No impulse. No desire."

"Beauty! Desire!" She stood and stared at him, as though his being able to pronounce those words, at a time and in a presence such as this, were a thing incredible.

He held his ground. Whitening, he met the stare across his dead son.

"These also have the right to be protected against their enemies," he said.

She continued to stare. But presently he saw that it was not at him she was staring. It was probable she had not heard his last words at all. Something swift, subtle, and terrible was happening to Anne.

Once she lifted a hand and passed it over her eyes.

She bent and touched the object on the grass. No one would have known the voice for hers. "Is Rex dead?"

She straightened and again put her hand in

front of her eyes. Then she looked to the right and to the left.

"Where is—"

She hesitated.

"Where are—"

She tried another way, looking down at the body.

"That's finished, then."

India stepped over quickly and put an arm around her.

"Anne, Anne! No! It's all right. I'm here."

Once more his eyes ran tears. For they had seen her being broken on the table like the cup a king has drained, seen her withering like a fruit rind thrown away.

. . . . . .

It was as if, a benevolent wizard having withdrawn the protection of his enchantment, Anne found the wolves of the years upon her in a pack. At the age of fifty-one her life was changed in one overdue and violent act. Seeing her lying day after day in bed, visibly

graying and shrinking, her mouth seldom opening, her gaze never removed for long from the ceiling on which shadows and refracted lights painted the maps of worlds that never were, India was more and more oppressed by the conviction that her mind was graying and shrinking, too.

But one afternoon, late, when the lengthening light came into the room full of the green of leaves, Anne turned her head on the pillow and looked full at him, where he sat near the bed.

He was startled. Something moved in the pit of memory.

"Why, Anne, dear!"

He was confused.

"Why, Anne India!"

He could not find the right words. The ones that came stammering from his mouth sounded inept and inane.

"Why, Anne, here you are."

That was it. It was the first time she had looked at him like that for twenty years.

But immediately, even before his happiness could shape itself in his mind, he felt the touch of a dismay as shapeless, an instinctive illness at his ease before so swift a reincarnation.

Anne spoke.

"Where are the children?"

"They're—they'll be all right. Flagg is coming home." He said it because he hoped it. "He—he ought to have been here by now."

"And Fern?"

"Well—Fern—Fern, Anne, is rather another—"

He got out of the deep chair and moved to a window. He stood looking out, his hands clasped behind him, conscious that her gaze had come after him, not importuning, but waiting.

"Yes," he said, making his voice hoarse for assurance, "Fern is coming too."

. . . . . .

It was on a Monday afternoon, just before leaving the book shop, that Fern had had a

long-distance call from Sam India. It was Thursday morning before she found Flagg.

He had left his job, that was the trouble. All they could tell her at the Hendrix shipping-sheds was that, on that same Monday, he had failed to put in an appearance. At his boarding-place she fared no better. Only once, since going out on Saturday, had he been known to return there, and then those below had simply heard him enter his room and leave it again, almost immediately.

What it was that carried Fern through that period of over sixty hours she would have found it hard to say. She would not have believed it possible that she could ever do the things she discovered herself doing, that she could suffer the contacts, accept the rebuffs she had to accept, and swallowing her pride till there seemed none left to be swallowed, go on insisting, imploring, to the end.

Was it the peculiar, and to her altogether novel, excitement of the man-hunt? There may have been a little of that, or there may

have been not much. Perhaps it was fortunate she had no time to stop and wonder; perhaps she would have thrown it over and fled if she had. Perhaps, after all, it was simply that of a sudden she had something to do which was pressing, punishing, and fiercely centered on other lives than her own. It wants something as potent as that to explain the fact that, doing the things calculated to make her the most miserable, if she was not positively happy she was, at least, free for a while from an unhappiness that had given her no rest for months till now.

She found Flagg on Thursday morning, early, lying in the sun on the sand at Revere Beach, not many rods from the spot where he and she had sat and talked and quarreled another time. At this hour the place was a travesty of holiday, peeling paint, red skeletons, and silence. A desert by the sea. Flagg was alone in it, his head aching, his stomach bad with the lees of five days' drinking, his soul sour with five days' fear of hell.

When she had sat down near him, spoken his

name, and gotten a half-incredulous, obfusticated nod by way of recognition, she said: "Flagg, your brother is dead."

It brought him rolling over on his side to face her, a light of defense, at once crapulous and canny, between his sore-looking lids.

"Cut it out. I'm not as tight as you think I am."

Now that she had found him, Fern felt suddenly and utterly used up. If he was going to ask her to fight him, on top of all the rest, there was nothing to do but quit. The lapping of the little waves along the sand and the serpents of sunlight winding with them were hypnotic. It would have been so easy to let go.

Ignoring his challenge, without emphasis she said: "Rex is dead, and your mother is ill."

"What of it?"

"Seriously ill. Your father is afraid, Flagg. You've got to go."

"Who says so?" Flagg squinted his eyes. There was a crease between them, where the ache was splitting his head. "Who sent you

after me?" He rolled his jaw. "Did she have the nerve? Or was it father?"

He flopped over on his back before she could answer.

"That's a good one!" It amused him; his diaphragm went up and down. To shield his eyes from the full beat of the sun he put his fists to them. "Excuse me, but that makes me laugh."

It was then that Fern came the nearest to giving up. She too lay back and put her hands over her eyes. The sand made a bed, quick and soft to shape about her, yet all of rock, inanimate, immaculate, wishless, a whole world thick. The whispering water whispered to itself alone, telling her nothing, asking nothing of her, letting her be. The sun that poured through her to the hollows of her bones was ninety million miles away. Give up. Forget.

But there was Flagg again.

"I'm not as tight as you think I am. What do you think you're doing down here? This particular place. What ever put it into your

head I'd be— Say, was this it? Did you think, just because I was like this, I'd be dumb enough to give you a chance to take another fall out of me—like that time? . . . That's a laugh . . . *'Touching' you!* . . . That's a laugh, all right, but it's on you, not me."

"Flagg, please."

"If you're trying to fool yourself into imagining there was anything—anything to do with you—us—or that night—any reason like that for my landing in this damn place—why, the laugh is on you again, Fern. Because I didn't even *know* I was here at the beach till a little while ago, this morning."

"I know the laugh is on me, Flagg."

"Well, all right, then."

"It's been on me more than once, Flagg. I've been here more than once since that night, and I've known I was here and I've known why."

"Why? What's been the—well, it's a free country."

"I've seen you in lots of other places, Flagg, when you didn't know it."

"And ran, I suppose, for fear I might forget myself again and 'touch' you."

"Oh, Flagg, dear, if you could only understand—"

"I would what?"

"You would—well—you'd understand. That evening here, Flagg, I wasn't feeling—I was jumpy. I was upset, horribly. If you had only given me time to—to try and tell you—"

"I see it all, perfectly." Flagg shook his head as if to make the ache hurt worse. "It's as plain as day, so why bother. You're crazy about me, eh?"

"Listen, Flagg. I had to stop caring for anyone so early in my life that the only ones I've ever known what it was to care for I can still count on the four fingers of this hand. And this one, the first one, is you."

"Yes it is—not!" Flagg tried to curl a lip. "If you think I'll believe that!" He glowered

into the top of the sky. He swallowed several times. Rolling over on his stomach, he put his fists back in his eyes. It was minutes before he spoke again.

"What's this you're trying to tell me about Rex?"

"He's gone, Flagg. He died Saturday night."

"Poor kid! He never had a ghost of a show. What was it, Fern?"

"I don't know. I haven't asked, though I've talked with your father over the phone several times. And he hasn't said."

"I can't make it seem— Why, but then, what's mother going to do?"

"She wants to see you."

"See *me?* Who says so? Did she?"

"Yes."

"That's a good one." His back humped and subsided. For a while he lay as quiet as sleep. Once he appeared to remember himself and shook with more of those railing chuckles. "That's a good one, that is." Then, by and by:

"You too, Fern. She said she wanted to see us both."

"Yes. But, but, Flagg, I'm—"

The boy was on his feet, all in one jump.

"Let's go!"

His face was a funny thing to see, his lips bitten, his wet eyes shining. He put out a long arm, a wide hand. "Come on, let's."

Fern, up, too, caught herself in time and held her ground. But her head was shaking. "It's different with me. You go. There's a train at eleven at South Station; you can catch it by going straight there, so hurry, do."

"You mean—"

"You're the one, really, she wants to see."

Flagg's light went out.

"I knew there was a catch in it somewhere."

Stiffening his neck and gathering his brows, he looked the other way.

"I'd be a pretty sight, wouldn't I?"

"You might mean the difference between life and death to her, Flagg."

Only too late Fern perceived where that was leading.

"*I* would. *Yes*, I would." He seemed to remember something he had forgotten for a little while. Out of the bottoms of his eyes he studied his own dishevelment. "Look at me." Redness ran over his face. "I'd be a great help. They'd be proud to see me, wouldn't they, both of them? Not even a job left; nothing but a hang-over."

Fern closed her eyes, tightly, tightly. She opened them again. She, this time, held out her hand.

"Come, Flagg, we've got to hurry."

"Nothing doing. It'd be bad enough even if you were there, and if you're not going—"

"Don't be a simpleton. Of course I'm going. All I wanted—I wanted to be sure you wanted me to be."

"Look at me, Fern. Is that straight?"

She was prepared. That was what she had been doing while her eyes were shut. So there was no sign of wincing or flinching when his

hand, big and clumsy with eagerness, closed on hers. Only an inner astonishment.

("Why are you doing this? What is it to you whether he goes or doesn't go, whether that woman sees him or doesn't see him? How can you?")

("But, after all, it'll soon be over. I'm only taking him as far as the station; anything to get him safely on a train. I guess I can.")

("Yes, but even that, even this. What right have you to ask it of yourself? Fern, you're a fool.")

Aloud, walking forward and leaving those clasped hands as far as she could behind and out of her sight and mind, she said: "We'll have all we can do to make it, Flagg. I hear a car coming. Run."

. . . . . .

Nothing had been farther from Fern's intention than this return to the house at Stonebridge. But once under way, once committed, even though in guile, she found that if she had counted on Flagg's being taken in by any

subterfuge or put off by any last-minute compromise she was mistaken. She had learned something of this at the South Station, and more at Providence. Like a lost boy who has got his grip on a known hand again, Flagg was not going to let it go.

He slept the better part of the five hours on the train; it would have been lucky for her if she could have done the same. Perhaps he only appeared to sleep. For if she once dared to stir, if only to try at last to free the fold of her skirt from the fist-grip he had locked upon it, he stirred as quickly and frowned between his closed eyes, alert even in his half-unconsciousness to keep her from escaping.

Wretched as she was, sitting bolt up there hour by hour, captive against him, more than once the thought of the irony of things vouchsafed her the momentary relief of a thin, derisive smile.

"And to think that I'm the one they had to put out of the way. That young vampire. Poor boys."

They had to get down from the express at Bridgeport. It was Fern's last chance; here or nowhere she must take her stand. She was hoping, anyway, that between abstraction and the homesickness which, in his waking intervals, she seemed to see laying a stronger and stronger hold on him, his own momentum would serve to carry him on from there.

But once again she had over-guessed her own will-power; underguessed his. Once again she had to capitulate at the last moment, when it looked as though the Stamford local were going to move out and leave him planted there on the platform with her, a two-legged mule.

"Yes, yes. All right then, I'm coming. I'll go as far as—"

"You'll go as far as home. Father would never get over it, and mother—mother, who's sick, who's dying, maybe—"

"She's your mother, Flagg, not mine. I've told you, I've told you, I've *told* you, it's *you* she wants to see."

"That's where you're crazy. You watch. You wait and see."

Fern couldn't help it then; for too many years she had weeded and watered this thin flower of her pride.

"I waited and I watched too long, Flagg. If ever once they had wanted—"

But then it was too late, for the train-step was moving, and she had to cry: "Well, well, come then. We'll see."

Whatever Flagg was to see, what Fern saw in the half-hour following was that from the instant of that last giving-in their roles had been reversed. From then on it was Flagg that made the going; it was she that was carried along.

And yet it was she, when at last they stood in the shaded room and saw a gray-haired, strangely-dwindled woman looking at them with clear eyes that were at once happy and inexpressibly sad, that did on impulse the better thing. When Anne India held out a hand, it

was Fern that went forward and got down by the bed and took it in her own.

For a moment the two women looked straight and hard into each other's eyes, trying to read. Perhaps they did read.

"I'm sorry, Fern."

"I'm sorry, mother. I never understood."

They went on looking.

"I always knew you would turn out a beauty, child."

"No, an ugly."

"Rex is gone, Fern. When I am gone, everything will be all right."

"Mother!"

"Don't call me 'mother.'"

"Why?"

"Because you must remember that I am not."

The woman's gaze got away from the girl's and passed over and beyond her to the two men in the corner by the door.

"No one has taken care of you, Fern. Take care of them."

"Flagg, son," she said, getting her other hand from beneath the covers.

And it was Flagg that, lowering his red face and looking down himself, turned through the door and ran away down-stairs.

. . . . . .

India caught him in the lower hall and with a quickness that was like anger got between him and the outer door.

"What in the name of the devil, son!"

"What's it to you?"

"Come back upstairs."

"Why should I?"

"If for nothing but that your mother is as you've seen, and wants you."

"Me!" The boy sneered and thickened his voice, cocked ruffian elbows, preened in his bitter misery the rumpled feathers of his self-disesteem. "*Me!*"

"You need a shave and a brush, yes. And a bath. Then you'll be—"

"Then I'll be *what?* Still a bum. Still a souse with a hang-over. So stop it."

Flagg clapped his palms to his temples and pressed as if he would have like to crush them flat. He spit at the fireplace. "God's sake, give me a drink before I go, and then let me get out of here."

"A drink? Certainly, son. What would you like to have?"

Flagg's hands came tumbling down. He stared.

"Why not, if you want it?" India put on a look of mystification. "You're at home, aren't you? We've everything in the house, and everything in the house is yours."

"Father, you fool!"

India stepped forward and got hold of him, throwing an arm around the shoulders that were inches higher than his own. There was a new note in his voice now, of affectionate railery.

"*You* fool. Come along with your dad."

Struck docile, Flagg let himself be led, upstairs and toward his mother's room, and then (he was grateful) past it and to his own.

He went down into a stuffed armchair. Where once he had been able to curl up in it, he filled it now.

Seeing the confused fellow's attention caught by that, India came and went, bringing shaving-tools, brushes, towels, as unobtrusively as a wise servant.

From the chair where a boy had curled, Flagg's eyes went to the bed where a boy had slept. Then to the little round step-out rug beside it. The chest beneath a window. The pictures. The suddenly remembered clean smell of this room, like no other. The remembered light, the level refraction come in from a whole hillside of summer greenwoods, cleared and cooled.

How long was it since he had forgotten the simplicity, the serenity, the security of this chamber, in which, from one generation to another, the elder sons of the India family had grown to men?

His father had come in again. This time

he had a laden tray, which he put down on the maplewood stand inside the door.

"Not at that bath yet, son? Loafer; . . . By the way, I don't know what your taste is; I've brought up a bottle of cognac—it's the Napoleon, and quite good. And one of port." He was busy with a ring, squeezing a key off. "And here's this that I'll leave you, if neither of these just hits it. You know where the cellar is."

It was the clink of the key on the silver that brought Flagg up standing.

"Father, what are you doing? Mocking me? Or are you crazy, or what?"

"I don't understand, Flagg. Didn't you say a little while ago that you would like a drink? It's been our habit in this house, when a gentleman—"

"Gentleman! Good God! *I'm* not a *gentleman!* Haven't you sense enough, haven't you eyes enough, to know you can't bring that booze—can't leave that key with *me?*"

India stood shaking his head, like a man helpless among foreign tongues.

"To begin with, neither of these is 'booze.' Each has a name, as old, perhaps older, than your own. Each has an identity, a character to keep that's worth more than money. Each has it's pride. . . . In the second place, you used the word 'can't.' Here, Flagg, there's no question of 'can't,' or of 'mayn't.' Get that through your head, son. Whatever the present law of the land may be, those two bottles are within it. There's no need of hurrying, of gulping at them on the sly, of keeping an eye out for a policeman. Nothing of that."

India thought he would sit down, then that he wouldn't.

"I've a warning for you, though. If your fancy happens to be for the kind of 'kick' you get out of 'hooch,' you'll be disappointed in these. There's not a drop of that kid bravado, that swaggering rebellion, that 'to-hell-with-the-government' sort of thing, in either bottle. And not a drop of graft. There's nothing ex-

citing about them. They're simply well-made, honestly-aged human drinkables, to be taken or not be taken, as one would—"

"But, father, you don't *see*. What are all those fine words to a fellow when the drink has got him? When he's got it fastened on him —the *taste?*"

"Do you like the taste?"

"Not 'taste' that way. I hate it."

"Then you don't mean 'taste.' "

"I mean— You know what I mean. When you know if you can only get a drink you'll feel better—anyway, not so bad—and can forget for a while—"

"Forget, eh? So you've followed with the sheep, Flagg. Learned to call that 'the taste.' Passing the buck. Taking the trouble out of your own entrails and putting it over on that tray there. Giving it the shape of a devil; bowing down before it in religious terror; hollering: 'It's all your fault; you've ruined me!' As if they knew or cared, those bottles. As if they were alive, malign and purposeful, and

it mattered a damn to them whether you touched them or not. . . . Flagg, Flagg, there's been too much good stuff gone into your making, for you to be talking the patter of the congregation of the worshipers of the great god Alibi. Alibi! I tell you, son, I have never yet seen a case where over-drinking was the cause of a man's failure; I've seen plenty where it was its confession. People hate to acknowledge that in their loved ones, so they hurry to catch at the easy alibi. 'If it weren't for the liquor!' Son, listen. Putting aside a few with taints or twists, who ought to be in sanitariums and out from under well folks' feet, I've never yet seen a man 'take to drinking' when he had anything else on earth he really wanted very much to do."

Flagg spread fierce arms.

"What about me, then? What's the use of my fighting? What on earth is there that I can do? When the best of my life's behind me, wasted."

He meant it. India hadn't to pretend; he couldn't help it; he laughed aloud.

"*Kid!* Why, your life hasn't begun yet! Didn't you know that? Yes, but you'll snort too, Flagg, when you look back at that, thirty or forty years from now. All that's behind you is your schooldays. You're about ready to go to work now."

"Schooldays! I hadn't any. I don't know a single thing."

"You know things your father doesn't. Mark me, Flagg, if I'd been the man I ought to have been, I'd never have let you go to the school you've gone to. But now that you've gone, and come home again, I can say it: you're better educated in a lot of ways than I've ever been. I only wish I had you in the publishing business with what you have to bring."

"Me?"

"I can find fellows who have their Greek and philosophy, plenty of them, and with the same brains and background as yours. But to find one who knows the feel in the hand of iron

battering on iron usefully, who knows real cold, real hunger, the language of men in pits, the ways of girls on streets—"

"Me?"

"I don't know how you feel about a printer's life, Flagg. If you like adventure, I can only tell you this: there's no other adventuring quite like it—adventuring with the dreams of ten thousand men." India opened his hands, palms up, the simplest of gestures. "There it is. Whether you want it or not, you alone can say. It's been in the India line for three generations. I'm beginning to grow old."

"But, father, you can't mean all this about—not about *me*."

"Think it over awhile, Flagg. . . . And, Flagg, see your mother—when you're ready to, that is. . . . If you want to come down to dinner presently, do; if you don't, don't. There'll always be something to pick up in the ice box. . . . Shall I close your door?"

Flagg stopped him. "If you're going, father, take that with you—that stuff on the tray."

"Why?"

"I don't want it. I don't need it."

"I see, but—as a matter of fact I wasn't going downstairs just now. Will it be in your way there? You won't be using that stand."

Flagg reddened. India closed the door and went away.

. . . . . .

For half an hour Flagg busied himself with the energy of the exalted. In his bath he splashed the water. His face lathered for the razor, he paused to stare his funny-looking self in the eyes.

"Me! Me, he meant."

It had grown dusk in the room when he finished his dressing. Ready to go, he still stood, caught in musing, among the old possessions that grew the more familiar as they grew the more shadowy. Not yet could he get away from that incredulous "Me!"

His attention, roving, came to the bottles on the tray on the maplewood stand. He sat

down on the bed and studied them across the gloom, still flushed with resurrection. He had to deride them: "Don't talk to *me*."

Straight away, having by his own word endowed them with lives, identities, and tongues, they made haste to speak.

The cognac fleered. "Feel like a million dollars, eh? Headache all gone?"

The port joined in. "No more leather-mouth? No more hollow-at-the-pit?"

"You're wasting your time," Flagg hit back. "You may as well realize that, once and for all."

But he *was* hitting *back*. That he felt he had to made him uneasy, and this made him furious.

The bottles knew it. Growing tall as the dark wrapped around it, the cognac gave him neither time nor quarter. "You're no fool. You know that just a few drops would set that headache right, and no harm done. Your father himself said—"

How on earth had the weird creature known

there was still a pain in Flagg's cranium, when Flagg himself had forgotten it? Still an esurient emptiness all through him, with which no bath or shave could do away.

He began to bluster. "You're wasting your time, looking at *me*."

How long had he sat there? It had grown black night.

"Who brought us up here? Your father. What did he say? 'Help yourself.' "

Now that they were invisible, the devil's angels filled all that corner of the room. He had to get to his feet at last, go, snap on the light, and face them.

"Damn your souls, I'll show you! Once and for all!"

Grabbing them by the necks he carried them to a window, opened the screen, and leaned out. Now he had them where he wanted them. He had them by their necks, and there was hard gravel down below.

But then, on the gravel, he saw a figure standing, idling, looking up at this window in

which he made so furious a silhouette. It was his father.

His father said nothing. But he seemed to say: "So they've succeeded in getting you to fighting them, have they, son?"

Flagg withdrew, his face hot. He sank down on the bed again, holding one bottle on either knee, a fist around its windpipe. He sat and he sat.

What was he to do with them? The more he strangled them, the more they sniggered. Frowning, perspiring, he sat and he sat and he sat.

And then he saw himself in the glass of the bureau across the room.

He began to laugh. If he didn't look too silly for anything! Humped there, knobbed with muscles, sweating cold, wrestling for life with a couple of—what?

He looked down at the things in his purpling fists. What? Two bottles made of glass made of sand. Filled with the juices of hillside grapes, gathered by peasants, treated by

unextraordinary working-men in immemorial, unmysterious ways.

He went and put them on their tray.

He mopped his face.

"Good Lord!"

His mirth got down into his chest.

"You poor idiot!"

His laughter was like a clearing wind.

He went to his mother's room. When he found she was awake, he leaned on the edge of her bed for a while and held her hand.

There wasn't a great deal to say in words. He did say: "I'm all right, mother, so that's all right. I'm as glad as a hound pup to be home again. Father's going to give me a job. What do you think of that?"

"I think that's a happy thing. You don't know, Flagg, how glad I am to see you so big and well. Since your brother died I've been thinking how sorry a mess—"

"I know. But it was all my fault. I'm sorry I ran away."

There was silence for another while. But by and by Flagg put a sudden hand to his head.

"Where's Fern?"

Anne didn't know. He went out into the hall. His father was just coming up the stairs.

"Where's Fern?"

"She went out a little while ago."

"Do you mean—she went away?"

"I don't know, son."

Flagg ran along the hall to the upper porch. It was a quiet night, a little warm, full of the fragrance of ripe summer. The moon, yet to rise, began to pale the stars above the ridge.

There was no use in scanning the valley. He went to the southern railing, above the garden. When he saw something gray moving among the green things a queer thought from somewhere flicked across his mind.

"Where's the ladder? The painters' ladder. It should be here."

What a difference! Scissoring his legs over the railing, he let himself down all his grown length. For a moment he hung by his hands

from the edge of the porch floor. Then he dropped. It was not a long way, but it ruined a hydrangea plant.

. . . . . .

Fern's thoughts were in a tangle; the confusion of her emotions had ended by driving her out of the house.

From the moment she had entered it, but especially from the moment she had knelt beside the bed of that whitening old woman who had been a mother to her once upon a time, she had not known what to do with herself or where to hide herself away.

The queerest nostalgia oppressed her, not a sickness to be at home, for she was there, but a sickness to be some one she was not.

It is not often that two people look at each other with open eyes, but that is what the two had done, the one on her bed up there, the other down beside it. And whatever Fern had read and seemed in a flash to understand, Anne India had seen Fern clearly as she was. It had shown in the hurt and pity in the shadows in the bot-

toms of the older woman's eyes; it had cried aloud in her "I'm sorry!" and Fern had heard.

Thereafter, all through the house, it was not so much the sight and scent of recollected things that punished Fern's heart as it was the ghost that followed her everywhere she went, a little girl-wraith, more eyes than anything, wondering as she slipped from the shadow to shadow in shy surveillance who this grown stranger could be who walked through the rooms and passages and up and down the stairs unattended and knew her way.

The utter innocence of that child-wraith, with her abashed, questioning half-smile and her half-troubled, uncomprehending eyes.

Nothing else could have hurt so. Not to be recognized by an old friend is bitter enough, but not to be known or even guessed at by the child one was is the bitterest.

It was this that had driven Fern from the house at last, as if in the open she could find cover to hide her. An act of folly. She might have known that, however haunted the house,

the garden, going from dusk to dark and peopled at every turning with the shapes of memory, would be a ground precisely fit for the shadowing of that phantom chatelaine.

From the bird-bath to the brick steps, from the brick steps to the button chrysanthemum corner, from there to the rhododendron brakes, from the rhododendron to the oval grass plot again and the bird-bath in its center, outflanked wherever she tried to turn, taken in ambush at every start by those perplexed little-girl eyes, driven back and driven back, pitilessly.

The bird-bath stood on its pedestal three feet high. Fern crossed her arms on the stone bowl and hid her face in the hollow they made. The child of her fantasy, emboldened, came stealing to stand not far away.

"Are you crying, lady?"

"No, no."

Fern opened her eyes. The cave of her arms had water at the bottom, the water in the bird-bath. A drop from her cheek fell into it and set rings going, touched faintly by a treble shine,

the remnant of dusk in the top of the west, the beginning of starlight, the pallor forerunning the moon.

In a light mixed as cunningly as that, nothing is weird.

"Who are you, lady?"

"I'm Fern."

"That's queer. Because *I'm* Fern."

"But I'm you."

Incredulity.

"But I *am*. You've *got* to believe it."

"Why are you so funny, then? Why aren't you happy? Why don't you play?"

"I'm not funny. I am happy. And I'll play."

"Do."

"But what? How? . . . Flagg, how do you play?"

Flagg, who had somehow been standing there for minutes, saying nothing, thought it over. He spoke in scorn.

"That's a good one. You, asking me. If ever there was anybody knew how to play,

that one was you. . . . Remember the ladder?"

"Yes, but there's no ladder. No ladder any more."

"Oh, haven't you seen—don't tell me you haven't seen the *ladder*."

"Poor Rex! I remember."

"It is a *little* bit cooler out here, Fern." Flagg laughed a funny laugh. "Got your moccasins?"

"Poor Rexie Tot."

"Poor nothing! Look at him. Try and beat him in a footrace to the deer. Come on, lazy."

There were diamonds on the grasses and diamonds on the flower stems. Half of the moon, up over the ridge, turned the tree-tops yellow for an instant before turning them silver.

Rex was racing so lightly, there ahead, that not a diamond was shivered, but so swiftly that he beat Fern and Flagg all hollow. Reaching the couchant stag, he threw a leg over, equestrian, and they saw that beast arise,

docile and tall in the argent light, arch its neck, wheel soundlessly, and, bearing the boy through striped light and shadow, trot away.

Light and shadow. Light in taut ribbons; shadow rough-hewn in big blue-black polyhedrons. Olympian groves. Elysian glades.

The night was neither hot nor cool. The stag's pace was neither fast nor slow. Or was it both? Distances were nothing to that gait, sweeping, elastic, full of verve, but stately. Mountains were but hillocks, shining rivers but longer leaps. Yet Fern and Flagg, running on either side, were never troubled.

Wizards had their minds, witches their wills. Now they neither marked nor cared where fantasy led. Their eyes were not for their feet or even for themselves at all, but only for that wild princeling riding across the sky.

No one would ever have believed it. Rex! Rex come into his own at last, bending the mettlesome stag to his will with strong hands on its antlers. Rex with the wind of flight in

his hair, his eyes shining, his face transfigured. Rex with really imperial legs.

"See!" they kept calling to each other, as their road ran on around the world. "Only look at the big fellow, will you!"

Around and around the valley of the world. And up the mountain toward the moon.

"Nobody else could ride so. Faster, Rex!"

"Spur on, Rex. No, *up!* Up the mountain! That's the fellow! Prance!"

What had the pale night done with its pallor? Blacker and blacker, striped with rarer and rarer beams. Wood interior. Steeper and steeper ground.

"Rex, what's wrong?"

"Look out, Rex! What *are* you doing?"

"Where *are* you going, Rex?"

Where nothing could be queer, here was a queer thing.

A refusal of the slope. A soundless snort. A shying. An abrupt, dim wheeling back. Not a word, not a warning. Gone.

"R-e-x!"

"R—e—x!"

But back down that hill the stag went, stubbornly, antlers high. Smaller and smaller in each moon-shaft Rex went riding away from them, his shoulders humped, head sunk a little, eyes on another road than theirs.

"Why?" Fern wondered, though she knew. Now he was no bigger than a silver bullet. No bigger than a silver needle down the striped corridor. "Why did he leave us?" she wondered when he was altogether gone.

Flagg waved a hand. "Good-by, old man!" He had a husk in his throat, because it was he that had done it all, ruthlessly.

"Good-by. Good luck!" Fern had one in her throat, too, because it was she that had helped.

Turning, two of them, not three now, their ears abruptly open to the brawling of water, they walked on into the hollow where White Brook ran black beneath the trees. They sat down on the turf of the bank above the pool. They looked around.

"I'm glad I've come here," Fern said, after a long while. "I hadn't realized it was all so small."

"This 'swimming pool' of ours—"

"How could we ever have—"

"Fern, we actually dived. Remember? But then, we were awful little ourselves, I guess."

"I hadn't realized. That we were so little."

A silence.

Flagg broke out, "Wasn't it fun!"

"I'd nearly forgotten. I could stay under longer than you could, Flagg. Remember? And *I* could keep my eyes open. I used to drive you wild, catching your ankles."

"Don't worry, you got what was coming to you. Some good spanks on the spanking-place."

Fern sat as still as stone. She stared without winking at the moon-flecked black surface of the pool. That tiny, tiny pool. Those tiny, tiny kids. . . . It was nothing she had expected, nothing she tried for; she hardly

knew what to do with it when it suddenly possessed her—a pure beatitude of mirth.

"You were mean, Flagg. Those spanks hurt. And *didn't* they turn *red!*"

"In the spring, yes. By August, though, you were always too heathen brown to show. You were a grand calendar, that way."

Flagg shook. Fern asked him why.

"I was wondering whether you and I would still be running around the landscape stark Adam naked till this minute if it hadn't been for Rex's—" His tone sobered, but he went on. "You remember that day. The one when Rex went woozy on us and poor mother had her stroke of nerves. Weren't you scared? Lord! but I was. I didn't know, then, it was mother that was the *petrified*."

"Why was she petrified? Wasn't it—"

"Why, you know how she was about Rex. And when she saw him throwing that fit."

"It wasn't us?"

Flagg gaped at her. "You crazy nut!"

A minute went by, and another and another.

"Flagg."

"Yes?"

"Take my hand."

Flagg took it. Before he knew enough even to be astonished, there were the two locked hands down on his knee, and Fern's head on top of them.

Startled as he was, he had to grin.

"*Now* who's the one—" He had sense enough to shut his mouth then. But she had caught his intention.

"Don't, Flagg." He felt her lips against his knuckles. "Oh, Flagg, dear, be good to me."

He pulled his hand up, and hers with it, and her head.

"And you," he cried, "be good to *me!*"

He held her face tight between his palms. Both of them pale, their eyes big, they stared. It wanted some staring—two lifetimes turning themselves right side out.

"Fern."

"Flagg."

He kissed her on the lips.

Dead girl. For a moment she was like that, unmoving, still staring. Then her breath came out.

"Ohhhh!"

Warmth poured over her face.

Still it was no more than a breath: "Ohhhh! Y-e-s!"

She came forward in one swaying motion and lay heavy against him, her head against his shoulder, her closed eyes against his neck. An arm went over his other shoulder, awkwardly. Clumsy fingers got hold of the stuff of his coat and no longer fumbled, their hold established, like a death-grip.

"Oh, my—my lover—yes."

. . . . . .

As they walked downhill after a while, Flagg felt her shoulders shiver a little under his encircling arm.

"You're chilled. You shouldn't have sat on the ground like that. Idiots, both of us."

The shivering stopped.

"I'm not cold at all."

The hardwood thinned along the path. Just above the house, where the slide always used to be in the winter, it gave place to pines, black even in bright moonlight.

"What *is* it, Fern?" Flagg brought her to a halt. "Is my arm too—"

His life had aimed too many blows at him. He had learned too well to dodge at a shadow and come back with his fists up.

"Would you rather," he demanded, his voice roughening as his heart got ready to sink—"rather I'd take my arm away? Is it—that?"

He could see that her face was twisting. His own flamed.

But then, "No!" she cried. "Not away! Tighter!"

"Flagg," she said, "when I—whenever I—Flagg, you've got to know enough never to let me go. You've got to be stubborn, got to be pitiless with me. And patient, my dear one. For a while."

She turned her face swiftly to him.

"You've kissed me. Don't let me forget how. Kiss me again."

. . . . . .

When Sam India, afoot on the upper porch, saw them coming down by the brick steps and the flower garden, he stopped dead by the railing and studied the dim figures for a moment before he breathed again. And that breath was the breath of life.

He was filled with a sudden happiness, not the less whole in that it was bound in one with melancholy. You watch the soldiers marching who have come back from the war. No odds what the war has done to them, it's something that they have been left alive.

In the obscurity of the night light, drawing toward the house, those two looked fair. But India knew. They were survivors, but after all, they *were* survivors, bringing back less than they had had to start with, and marked.

Still—happiness. If they were starting out again, a little late and a little lame, still, they

were starting out. They were on the road again. They were going somewhere, after all.

India stepped back into the shadow. He didn't want them to see him.

"Little thanks to me," he mused. He was out of it.

He saw his life as a series of brave advances, short-lived, and long, shambling retreats.

He went softly and listened outside of Anne's window.

"Not asleep yet?"

"Where are they, Sam?"

"They're coming in."

THE END

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